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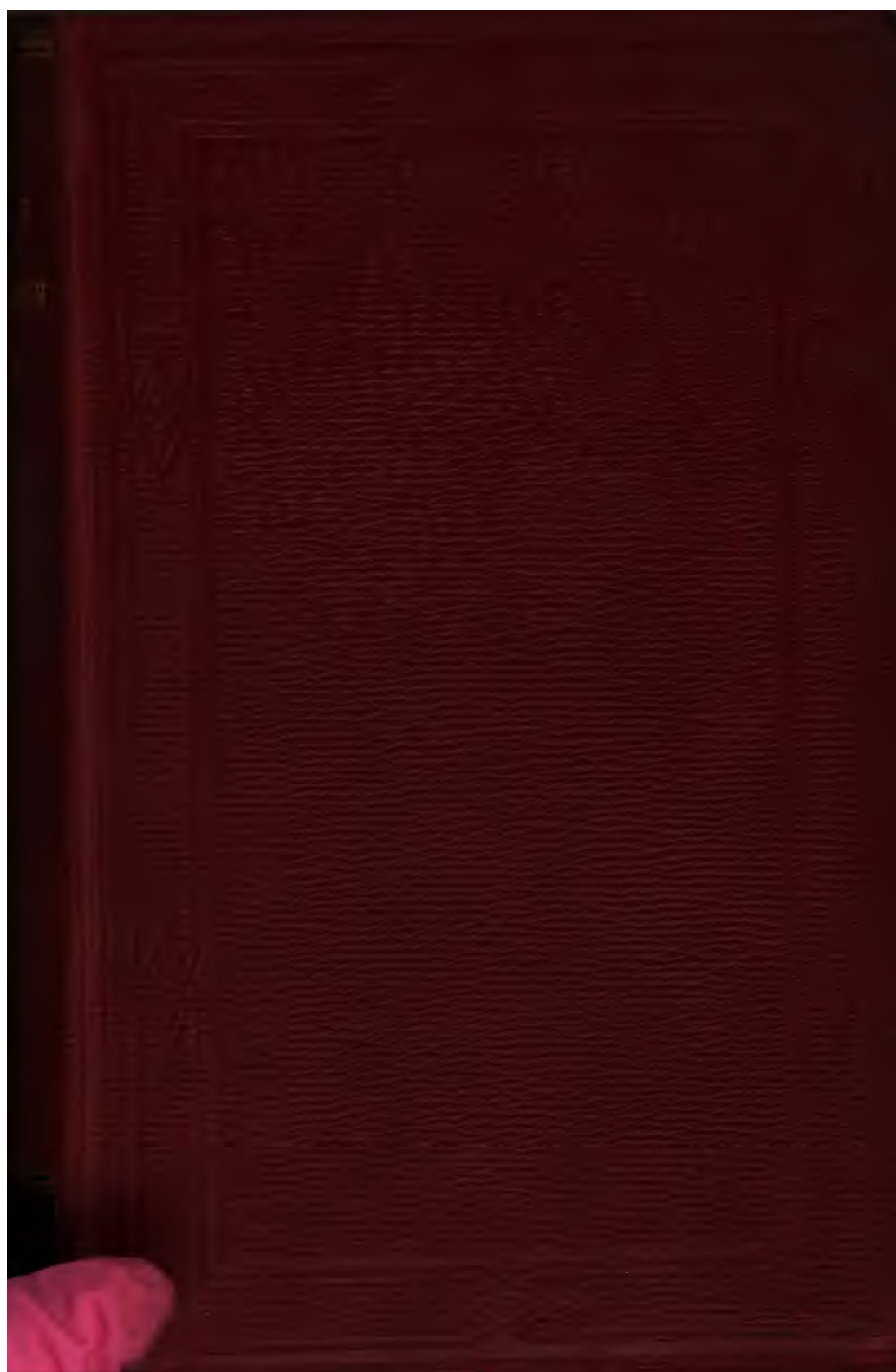
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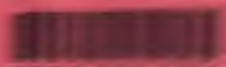
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THE
HEIRS OF CHEVELEIGH.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY SPOTTISWOODE AND CO.
NEW-STREET SQUARE.

THE
HEIRS OF CHEVELEIGH.

BY
GERVAISE ABBOTT.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
LONGMAN, BROWN, GREEN, LONGMANS, & ROBERTS.

1858.

249. v. 1.



THE
HEIRS OF CHEVELEIGH.

CHAPTER I.

7

"Perchance through many a late return of sickly winter's gloom
Thine age with unobserved decay shall ripen for the tomb;
And maybe, on yon pumice cliffs December's star⁴ for thee
Is shattering for the last time now the vexed Etruscan sea."

HOR. *Od.* I. ii. 4.

A PAGE from the volume of the world's dark histories—the annals of a mysterious crime and a heavy retribution—a tragedy acted by obscure men, and probably already buried in the oblivion which overtakes even scenes on which public attention is riveted the most closely, and still more those which hardly penetrate beyond the limits of their actual occurrence; and yet a tragedy for the performance of which there were needed the strength of fierce pas-

sion, the grip of avarice, the agony of remorse, the endurance of patient love ; all those conflicting forces in man's nature, which, if we could really see them in their action and effects as they are seen by the spirit-world around us, would be no less startling than the physical phenomena of the earthquake or the hurricane. How many such pages lie in that terrible volume — scattered sibylline leaves, of which we may here and there seize and connect a few fragments, but of which the greater part will never be read by human eyes, until, indeed, the crime and anguish of the world's history shall be atoned by the fires of its dissolution.

We are in the house of mourning — heavy and recent, as a glance would show : the mourners are a lady, Mrs. Akehurst, and her two children, a daughter about seventeen, and a son some four or five years younger. Five days since, (for thus far only has the dark shadow travelled over the dial,) Mrs. Akehurst's husband, a hale, strong man in the prime of life, had presided at a tenants' dinner. The party broke up early, for the month was October, and the tenantry lay scattered at considerable distances ; the last to leave was Oliver Cowdery,

who rented Hawthornden, two miles across the hills. Mr. Akehurst had a loud, good-tempered voice; his "good-night to you" to Cowdery rang brisk and cheerily as the farmer trotted down the avenue, lighted with a magnificent sunset, and rich with twenty tints of the early autumn. But the hand of death was on the eyes that rested for a moment, not with any marked interest, and yet perhaps not thanklessly, on the fair scene. Turning to enter the hall door, Mr. Akehurst staggered and fell forward. The surgeon, who arrived with fair speed, could only confirm what was self-evident, that life was extinct; and a subsequent examination traced the calamity to its true cause, an unsuspected heart complaint. It makes sure work, *that* malady; leaving the outworks untouched, and mining straight to the citadel, where the spirit of the living man within dozes unconscious on its ward.

Mr. Akehurst's character had been marked by neither the weakness nor the vices that would have made him enemies, and had much that was liberal and generous, which, as the owner of an ample property, had ensured him many friends. Large the property unquestionably was, and unencumbered. The rent roll of Cheveleigh showed an annual result of some twenty thousand pounds and upwards;

besides this there were estates of some value in Wales; and common gossip capped these desirable conditions with an extravagant income from the funds. But Mr. Akehurst, although open on almost all other points, maintained an impenetrable reserve on all matters of finance and business; so that the gossip aforesaid, having nothing but surmises to work with during Mr. Akehurst's lifetime, was a good deal disappointed, upon his death, to find that the personal property was sworn under a sum which, although not trifling, fell far short of its expectations.

But it is time to return to Mr. Akehurst's widow. Not, indeed, that we must venture to enlist the reader's sympathy too strongly on her behalf. Doubtless, there are differences in people's natures. With some, the impact of grief harrows up the soul at once, leaving it for long years, perhaps for a whole lifetime, scathed and sere, as if the lightning had barked the trunk and stripped off the green branches. With others, again, the burst of sorrow, terrible to witness in its onset, subsides after a time, and leaves the heart at liberty to receive new impressions: the torrent has spent its fury, and the equable waters of life flow again in their accustomed channel. And there is a third nature — alas! who

knows not *that*? — where the bruised reed cannot stand under the storm, but droops at once, silently and for ever. But Mrs. Akehurst's grief had nothing in common with these; the emotions were of a lower stamp, and their expression was proportionably loud and voluble. She could not forbear talking of what she suffered; her manner and language were an exhibition and parade of sorrow; without being intentionally insincere, she was adopting the likeliest mode of becoming so. At least, so thought the little old-fashioned rector of Cheveleigh, who hastened at the earliest period when he thought it judicious, to offer his ministrations and sympathy, and returned, speculating whether his own wife, of whose dapper good-tempered face he was as proud now as in the days of their young love, would have found an equally copious supply of words under a similar bereavement. But then, the old gentleman was known to be sarcastic; in fact, he read himself a lecture that evening on his breach of charity.

Certainly, however, it must be confessed that in the interval which had elapsed since the fatal occurrence, Mrs. Akehurst was more comforted than her habitually desponding tone and occasional paroxysms of violent grief would have allowed one to

suppose possible. In five days, by unparalleled exertions, the neighbouring market town of W—— had supplied the essentials of a mourning, unusually deep and sombre even for her loss. (Strange, that while everything else in society is changed, the chief mourner, her whose sun is indeed gone down at noon, should be condemned, amid the bitter realities of grief, to wear the stifling incongruous dress of two centuries back; in hot weather, at least, a species of mitigated suttee.) However, society is autocratic; and as the cap became her, and the crapes were not oppressive in October, Mrs. Akehurst acquiesced; and with considerable resignation, some sixty hours after her husband's demise, sat in grand jury with her French maid upon a large collection of trinkets and dresses, which, being condemned at this preliminary stage, were placed promiscuously in thirteen drawers until time and opportunity should offer for their removal to a more strict seclusion, during the orthodox term which must elapse before their services could be again required. In truth, we must not conceal from the reader (what he will already have surmised) that Mrs. Akehurst was not a person to elicit or repay much affection. A vulgar-minded, frivolous woman, with no great beauty, and much heartlessness, it

was wonderful that she had ever attracted the admiration or won the honest love of John Akehurst. He had speedily discovered his mistake, but he did the best he could under the circumstances. His wife had a handsome jointure charged upon the Welsh property; *he* maintained a liberal establishment at Cheveleigh (which migrated annually to London for the season), tolerated his wife's "dear friends," and, having thus done all that society could expect from a model husband, left her to go her own way, while he went his. Doubtless he would have wished to do much more, but there were no materials to work upon in the hard calcined character of fashionable life; and every attempt to improve upon the conditions of mutual acquiescence inevitably showed that they were the only ones under which two incompatible natures could remain united. Lucy Akehurst's birth had dispelled the last illusion of her father's married life. He had hoped that maternity might have elicited or created some real feeling in the heart which seemed blunted in all other relations. But the hard, selfish wife continued the hard, selfish mother. The child was not reared by herself; she would have been compelled to forego the London season for the purpose, which of course was out of the question; besides, Mrs. Akehurst

disliked very young children. So the infant Lucy screamed and throve under a stranger's care in a spacious nursery (politely situated out of all possible hearing of the reception-rooms), was produced when asked for, and brought down once a day to be exhibited to her mamma over her morning toilet; while the disappointed husband, having given vent to one sigh of regret for the day-dream which he had cherished more fondly than he was himself aware, resigned himself to a domestic separation under the same roof; fondled and spoilt his child whenever he could get the chance of doing so, and perhaps lived, on the whole, less unhappily than Spondle, the bank clerk, in the adjoining by-street, who derived annually one hundred pounds (minus income tax) from government, and a fine baby (minus everything) from his doting wife. At least, the rich man occasionally tried to whistle himself into the belief that he had the best of it. And when Charles Akehurst, the lad whom we have already mentioned, was born, and grew up in health and strength (there had been another son between, christened Walter, born about two years before Charles, but who died in infancy), and Miss Lucy herself, in spite of his spoiling, began to emerge into womanly grace and beauty, he felt no doubt of the correctness of his theory.

Five days a widow ! Mrs. Akehurst was decidedly tired of the fifth day, as she sat at its close in the darkened drawing-room of Cheveleigh Park, the sunset, the rich golden sunset of that day of the farmers' dinner, being allowed to stream in at one shutter of the western bay-window. The fact was, Mrs. Akehurst had been acting a part. Not, of course, as we have said, that she was intentionally an actress or unreal. It cannot be but that some voice from the spirit-world should reach even the most careless during those still, strange hours, when we are brought so visibly into contact with death ; when it is a presence to be felt in our houses, shaking us out of our indifference and common-place, and making the gaudy trappings of life, with which we have so long defied its power, the witnesses and trophies of its victory. But still, Mrs. Akehurst had certainly discovered, on this day especially, that there was some character to be sustained, to which she occasionally found no response whatever in the actual state of her feelings, and which, to tell the truth, she would not unwillingly have laid aside. There had been visits of sympathy from two or three intimate friends of the family, who, in the hope of being useful, had anticipated the prescribed period of formal condolence ; this was irksome, as the inter-

views lasted some time ; and it somehow happened that, while Mrs. Akehurst's face was at times buried in her handkerchief, and her lamentations interrupted by sobs, and even incipient hysteria, the subject which did press most heavily upon the widow's mind meanwhile was the stupidity of the deaf milliner from W——, and the very irritating doubt (happily solved at the time we speak of) whether some special instructions as to the mourning had penetrated the sensorium of that good lady's brain. There was a part, too, to be played before the children ; and, perhaps, Mrs. Akehurst's most available escape from her unrealities had been the society of the French maid above referred to, who had at once the quickness to see how matters stood, and the tact to supply the appropriate remedy ; keeping up an incessant babbling on all manner of trifles, but in a tone of voice so dismal and dejected, that it allowed the widow to be amused with her gossip without the necessity of rebuking it. But still, notwithstanding these consolations, Mrs. Akehurst felt that she had had a fatiguing day ; and she reclined on one of the couches with a proportionate feeling of satisfaction.

" Charles, how tiresome you are—there is that door again."

" I am very sorry, Mamma, I could not help it,

the wind caught it: I did not know you were asleep," answered Charles Akehurst, spoiling, as young people often do, one good reason by the addition of a second.

"I do not think that you or Lucy ever consider me in any way, either of you. — Oh! dear, dear, where is Lucy, I wonder?"

"I have brought you in the letter-bag, Mamma; I went out with Nero for a few minutes down the avenue, and met the postman coming up."

The letter-bag promised some diversion, and Mrs. Akehurst perused its contents with considerable zest, running over the principal part of the epistles, which were numerous, with a rapid glance; but pausing upon others, and occasionally reading a sentence here and there aloud, accompanied with interjectional reflections on her own misfortunes. Indeed, Mrs. Akehurst was partial at all times to interspersing her conversation with a deep inspiration, partly sigh, and partly groan, as well as with sundry ejaculations of a generally lamentable tendency; the combined effect of which was to impress upon the hearer's mind, according to the topic in hand, either how much Mrs. Akehurst herself was to be commiserated, or how much cause there was for thinking deplorably of the character or circum-

stances of her neighbours; it being a prevailing feature in the good lady's conversation, that she invariably took the most gloomy view of every subject, and generally contrived, in the course of ten minutes, to render the listener intensely uncomfortable, both as to his own affairs and those of his friends. Marvellous, too, was the amount of inuendo and covert sarcasm conveyed by these interjectional appeals to sympathy; but they would undoubtedly become irksome in print; and as there is absolutely no notation that would express the tone of dejection and despondency infused by their means, for the laudable purposes aforesaid, into the most common-place sentences, we must request our readers to supply mentally these piquant additions, which frequently gave the whole flavour to the composition. With the exception of a few business letters to the deceased, the contents of the post-bag were almost wholly letters of condolence, varying according to the disposition and degree of intimacy of the writers. One only of these requires any particular mention; it was from Mr. Akehurst's younger and only brother, whom the news had just reached. In a few warm, heartfelt sentences he expressed his own grief, and endeavoured to alleviate, as far as might be, that of his brother's widow: the

news had arrived too late to allow of his being with her that day (he lived in a remote county), but she might probably expect him the day after; at any rate, nothing should prevent his being at Cheveleigh in time to pay the last sad rites to one whom he had so deeply esteemed and loved. Mrs. Akehurst made no comment on this letter, but rang for dinner.

And where *was* Lucy? Where she was quite certain of not being interrupted by her mother, at least; where she would unconsciously to herself have shrunk from being, had such an interruption been possible. In the silent, peaceful chamber of the dead; weeping over the loved face (which was still uncovered), as if her slight frame would have torn itself in sunder with every fresh burst of grief; clinging with intense passionate fervour to that unbreathing image, which faith and reason both taught her was not the father she had lost, but in which there still seemed some protection; something tangible amid the dreary shipwreck of her young love.

Grief was indeed very new to Lucy Akehurst. It is many years since I have seen her, and yet nothing can ever efface from my memory the brightness, the wonderful joyousness of her face and manner: her voice singularly low and sweet; her

eyes—*such* eyes!—full of pathos and tenderness, clear deep wells, in which the soul gleamed like the light of passing stars; her step and carriage, soft, graceful, and refined; and yet—voice, eye, every step, every gesture, instinct with such airy, happy mirth, that to hear and see her was like passing into a new creation. And bitterly indeed had this first heavy sorrow told upon the joyous heart of the young girl. Very hard it was, too, to have no one to mourn with her, to direct her how to mourn; for in this, too, there is an education; and the years of life, chequered with sadness and disaster, soon bestow it. Charles, a handsome, spirited lad, had grieved passionately for his father, whose constant companion he had been in every sport and excursion. But it was inevitable to the very excess of his boy's grief that it should wear itself out; and after the first burst of anguish was over, Lucy's deeper nature was left to grapple, unassisted and in solitude, with her speechless grief; like the Electra of the Greek tragedian, in the chamber which held her father's impassive form, she sate as at a shrine, the gate of the invisible world, the last asylum of orphanhood, the haven of her prayers and tears.

“Your uncle Akehurst will be here for the

funeral, Lucy," observed Mrs. Akehurst, as they sat at dinner.

"Oh! I suppose so, Mamma," was Lucy's answer; "of course he will, what could have made you doubt it?" For Lucy was much attached to her father's brother, a scholar and perfect gentleman, who doted upon his niece's beauty and intelligence; while, by Mrs. Akehurst, one so uncongenial to herself was regarded with almost open aversion. In fact, Frederick Akehurst himself, although he had not yet fully penetrated his sister-in-law's character, and treated her with uniform gentleness and courtesy, usually experienced in her society a vague uneasiness and irritation, like that with which some people are affected by the presence of a cat in the room; the result of which mutual antipathy was, that Mr. Frederick Akehurst, especially of late, had been a much less frequent visitor at Cheveleigh than either his brother or himself could have wished.

"You should not answer me so hastily, Lucy," replied her mother, "or with so much temper; I never said I doubted it: only your uncle is an eccentric man, and does things sometimes very differently to other people, and I really did not know whether he would think it necessary to come. By the way, bring me the letter, Repton; it is in

the drawing-room on the table near my desk — Mr. Frederick Akehurst's letter. I really do not think your uncle has said by which coach he would come to W — to-morrow, if he comes at all ; and we shall have to wait dinner for him, or he may arrive the last thing at night."

"Oh! indeed, Mamma, I am quite sure Uncle Frederick will be early," replied Lucy ; "and whenever he comes, it won't make the least difference to him where he dines or sleeps ; it would be the last thing he would think of. Dear uncle ; he was always so fond of —" and Lucy stopped, for the poor bleeding heart and quivering lips could not pronounce the name.

"I must insist, Lucy," said Mrs. Akehurst, as she confirmed her doubts of her brother-in-law's precision by a glance at the letter which the servant brought her, "I must insist on your not giving way as you do upon every occasion. I do not mean, of course, that it is not proper for you to feel very sorry for your poor father, and I am sure my own feelings have quite overpowered me to-day several times ; but it is a different thing when we are alone ; one cannot keep oneself always on the strain : and I wish too, very much, that you would come down stairs, and help me to receive people when they call."

"I did not know Lady Emily had been here till afterwards. It was very kind of her to call so early," added Lucy, rather hastily; for she dreaded a possible cross-examination as to where she had spent those long hours of the forenoon.

"Oh! she was most kind and affectionate," answered Mrs. Akehurst, who was now launched upon the congenial topic of her visitor, "she spoke so very feelingly upon your poor papa's death, and she seemed quite to sympathise with me in being left as I am with the charge of you and Charles, which of course is a great responsibility. I am afraid it will be very difficult to keep Charles at all in order" (the unconscious Charles slept sound, worn out with sorrowing, and the vacuity of his new life; his head had fallen forward on the table, almost before the cloth had been removed from it); "your father indulged him so much, letting him have his own way in everything, although I always warned him of the mischief he was doing the boy's character."

"Oh! really, Mamma, I don't think Charles is at all spoilt; not nearly so much as boys of his age generally are: and I am sure now he would avoid everything that would pain or annoy you."

"Then there is this servants' mourning," pursued

Mrs. Akehurst, ignoring the interruption, "it is so very difficult to know what to do; the men's mourning can be sent from London, of course; but the other servants' must be made up here, and that Mrs. Cadwell is so dreadfully deaf and stupid. I was talking to Lady Emily about it, and I believe she would have given me several useful hints, but that unpleasant little Dr. Davis called in from the rectory."

"Oh! Mamma, Dr. Davis! I am sure he is so very sorry for you and for all of us. I am quite sure"—But here the door opened, and the servant announced Mr. Frederick Akehurst, who had been able to reach Cheveleigh earlier than he had expected.

It was two days afterwards, at an early hour in the forenoon, that the funeral pageant stood at the door of Cheveleigh Court. It is the custom, one might rather say the privilege, of the West of England, where Cheveleigh lies, that the females of the family attend the corpse to its last resting-place equally with the men; and Mrs. Akehurst and Lucy were among the mourners. Cheveleigh church lay in a nook of the hill on which the Court stood, about half a mile to the southward. As the procession wound through the park-gate, it was joined, notwithstanding the early hour fixed for the interment,

by numerous carriages of the neighbouring gentry, among whom Mr. Akehurst had been an esteemed and popular resident, as well as by a large body of tenantry: the latter had wished to carry the coffin themselves to the church, but Mrs. Akehurst disapproved of the proposal, and it was dropped. Slowly onward, first by the park paling, under the shadow of its foliage, crimson, orange, bright yellow, and russet brown, as the hues of autumn lent their varied colouring; then down the steep slope of the lane, burrowed into a deep defile between the miniature cliffs of the fox-mould; then across the bright meadows, glittering with dew and gossamer; past the scented apple-orchards and myrtle-grown cottages of Cheveleigh that was; under the lich-gate, and by the graves, rising ridge upon ridge, of Cheveleigh that had been; slowly onwards to the bourne of man's earthly toil, in the wake of Death (like captives swelling the pomp of a consul's march up the Via Sacra of old Rome), moved the throng of mourners; that mingled stream of life, rife with the hopes and anxieties, the gladness and sorrow, the hate and the love of the throbbing human heart; all keen and engrossing as if no other actors were ever to occupy their place on life's stage; as if their own time was not coming in the silent unrecording

grave, before whose open portals they now paused. As the service proceeded, Mrs. Akehurst's demonstrations of grief became frequent and noisy, jarring on the solemn tones of the reader, and the low-breathed words that speak of life in death; and forcing on Frederick Akehurst that exquisite discomfort which arises from the necessity of thinking and judging harshly of others at the very moment when the circumstances of our common nature dispose us to charity and self-reproach. Lucy knelt at some distance from the rest, almost obscured by a huge Norman pillar, part of an earlier fabric, which had formerly supported one of the arches between the nave and what was then a side aisle, and now formed a projection from the wall, near the family vault of the Akehursts; in this retreat she wept silently and unobserved. Peacefully, when all was over, and the church was once more left to its solitude; peacefully did the sweet October sunlight stream in through the open casement, and light up at one time the brown oak carvings of the massive benches (coeval with the last Henry) in which the villagers of Cheveleigh, generation after generation, had knelt and worshipped, till their turn came under the green sod outside; and at another, the quaint family aisle of the Akehursts, with its panelled screen, clasped books of prayer,

faded hangings, and rust-eaten sword and helmet (a legacy from feudal times), suspended overhead; peacefully, as a slight breeze stirred the noble elms in the churchyard, their discoloured leaves flickered one by one from the tall branches to the ground; and peacefully, in the burial-place of his fathers, resting for ever (and as the simple faith of the Church of England teaches, well and happily) from life's turmoil, lay the dead man, for whom seasons must now change, and suns rise and set in vain.

It had been Frederick Akehurst's wish to leave Cheveleigh immediately after the interment; but Mrs. Akehurst was desirous that he should be present at the opening of her husband's will, as to which no reference at least had hitherto been made on either side. The document was easily found, and its dispositions were remarkably simple. Legacies were given to servants and others in the employ of the deceased; a few annuities of trifling amount to some family dependents in the village; and with these exceptions, the testator's estate, both real and personal, was left to his widow; who was, at the same time, appointed executrix, and sole guardian of the testator's children. The will was in Mr. Akehurst's own handwriting, and bore date rather less than a year before his death. The language was too strictly

accurate to make it probable that it was drawn up by the deceased himself, who had no knowledge of legal phraseology; it would appear from the rapid uniform hand, and the occurrence of some trifling mistakes in one or two of the technical terms, to have been a copy either from a draft furnished by some professional person, or from a previous will. Everything was perfectly regular and valid; but Frederick Akehurst seemed, to a certain extent, disturbed by the document; he hesitated rather irresolutely, for a minute or two, and then said, "I suppose, of course, Clara, you have examined my brother's papers thoroughly—I mean, there is no possibility of there being any other will of later date."

"I am not aware of any, but you can search if you think fit," replied Mrs. Akehurst. "I am sure if John had wished to leave you or Mrs. Frederick any legacy, I should never have opposed his wishes for a moment. But I do not see why you should suppose there would be any other will than this."

Frederick Akehurst, who had a small but comfortable independence, and certainly had never wished or expected any addition to it from his brother's larger fortune, coloured violently, and bit his lip. But the imputation and its author were too contemptible to be refuted.

“My ground for supposing that there might be another will, Clara,” he replied, after a moment or two of self-control, “was from something John himself said to me when we were last in town together, at the time of Uncle Charles’s death, which you may probably remember was in the spring of the present year, three or four months after the date of this will. He mentioned to me then, that he had a good deal of business to transact with his solicitors, and I remember particularly his speaking of having a new will made. I remember this, because, as you know, he was always very reserved about his affairs, and I was surprised that he had named the subject to me at all; but he went into no particulars even then, and I have no idea of the alterations he proposed to make; in fact, until you produced this will, I had no knowledge whatever of the disposition he had made of his property in any way. However, as no other instrument has been found, no doubt John was prevented from doing what he proposed; if the solicitors had any will in their possession, they would at once have forwarded it to you, as they must unquestionably have heard of his death, which was in all the papers. And now, Clara, I believe I must take my leave.”

"You will stay to luncheon, it will be ready in a few minutes."

"Thank you, no—I will have a kiss from my favourite Lucy, and shake hands with poor Charles, and then I shall just be in time to catch the mail at W—. The fact is, my wife has been far from well lately, and I am anxious to move her southwards with as little delay as possible before winter sets in, and every day now makes a difference. Good-bye, Clara. I think it probable, if Italy agrees with Mary, that we shall make it our residence for some years; its climate, its stores of ancient and modern art and literature, have an inexpressible attraction for me. But we will write to you of our movements, and meanwhile, God bless you." Frederick Akehurst had apparently thought of touching his sister's cheeks with his lips, for he advanced nearer than was required for a mere shake of the hands; but he thought twice of it, and abstained. He repaid himself for this abstinence with Lucy, and then withdrew.

Farewell, Frederick Akehurst, courteous, refined, unsuspecting; ever happy in thyself, ever adding zest to the happiness of others. Farewell; may no gale from the snowy Apennine chill the frame of thy

gentle-hearted wife in her quest of health, amidst the marble terraces of Genoa, or in the streets of stately Florence. May Rome yield to thee the key of its hidden stores, Venice lull thy soul with its poet's dream, Naples smile on thee from the sunny depths of her matchless bay. And yet,—couldst thou but lift for one moment the veil of the future; couldst thou but know to *what* custody thou art leaving the fair sorrowing girl who has just clung to thy embrace as if she lost a second father in thy parting; faith, I think thou wouldst brave out one or two more winters in thy old rookery at Morpeth, and the Foreign Office would lose its two guineas upon the passport for which I see Mr. Frederick Akehurst's application has just been endorsed by his bankers.

CHAP. II.

"My child, beyond the funeral pyre
 The slain still live in prayer ;
 The desolating maw of fire
 Hath no dominion there ;
 Unchanged in will, though long years roll,
 The stern inexpiable soul
 Keeps its dread vigil by the tomb ;—
 The mourner's wail is sung and said,
 But when the destined hours have sped,
 Th' assassin reaps his doom."

ÆSCH. Choeph. 324.

"THE great difference is, Madam, that in these Palladian structures we study regularity of outline as the cardinal point. If you will look at this ground plan;—thank you, Master Charles, large drawing on the other table; thank you, Sir;—if you will just run your eye over this ground plan, with the facade and side elevations, you will see how strictly square and uniform the whole thing is, whereas, if you have ever noticed, Madam, in the present structure (very good, Madam, very good indeed in its own way, but dreadfully old-fashioned); here is one wing, to call it so, with the reception-rooms and principal staircase,

and no upper story, only that kind of battlement ; then comes the hall, which is of lower elevation still, excepting the octagonal tower on one side ; then there is that tall pile of building with the steep roof, where the principal bedrooms are, and the floor with the garret windows (dormer I believe some of our architects call them now) over them, and those low kitchen lights of every shape and size underneath ; then the offices project partly on one side and partly in the rear ; and—in short, there is no arrangement, no symmetry, all irregular gables and turrets and stacks of chimneys, a buttress here, and an oriel window there, just as if the house had tumbled together by accident.”

Mrs. Akehurst was a voluble talker, but she was fairly driven out of the field by her new architect. Cheveleigh had required some extensive repairs, and the superintendence of these had in the first instance been entrusted to a firm in London, fairly qualified to carry out the restoration of the noble old Court, one of the finest county specimens of the Tudor style, then already beginning to receive from more than one eminent name that degree of attention which in our time has happily led to its *renaissance*. In an evil day, however, Mrs. Akehurst returned a visit of condolence at the Grange ; a

superb Italian mansion, built from designs by Wren, whose antipathy to home-grown English architecture is well known. The proprietor had been for years absent, and it was the first time Mrs. Akehurst had seen the house. Its superb terraces, Italian garden, fountains, colonnades, clustering pillars, and stately portico, threw into the shade, in her judgment, the picturesque but irregular beauty of Cheveleigh; and the re-construction of the latter became a favourite idea with her.

Mrs. Akehurst knew nothing of architects or architecture, you might as well have catechised her on the Copernican system or the Alcoran; but she had a never-failing resource in Lady Emily Charteris, her nearest neighbour and firm friend. Lady Emily was one of those useful people, who always know where to go for everything; a kind of professional and trade directory. Her recommendations turned out badly enough at times, but she had the merit of being always ready with them; the quality was indifferent, but the supply was inexhaustible. Now Mrs. Akehurst had no sooner hinted her intentions upon Cheveleigh than Lady Emily was prepared with the very man to carry them out; "Mr. Bilderbit of Norwich; such a clever man in his profession, and *so* agreeable; she would write that very day to get

his address from Sir Gosling Grey, who always employed him." And the result of Lady Emily's good offices was that in a few weeks Mr. Bilderbit, well known in professional circles as a mere charlatan, devoid either of genius or information, but who had contrived, by a good address, and making the most of some distant family connections, to find occasional patronage among the aristocracy, was duly installed as the architect of Cheveleigh, the rebuilding of which was now finally determined on. Mr. Bilderbit's designs for the new house were prodigious; in size and costliness they would have suited a palace of the Cæsars. We need hardly add, that they were heavy, tawdry, and common-place; their essential poverty of conception being relieved at various points by grotesque parodies on the style, which would have made Sir Christopher Wren heartily ashamed of his disciple. The first estimate for the intended building was so considerable that even Mrs. Akehurst's vanity and recklessness of expenditure quailed before it, and the architect was reluctantly compelled to make considerable retrenchments in his plans; the discussion of these (to which his glib tongue had imparted considerable divergence) having just concluded as our chapter opens.

"You will complete the plans, then, Mr. Bilder-

bit," said Mrs. Akehurst, "with the alterations you have suggested to-day—and my man of business will see you as soon as possible upon the contracts. I wish the estimates could have been got out at a lower sum, but of course your commission will be the gainer."

"Oh, indeed, Madam," replied Mr. Bilderbit, "you are too hard upon us architects; we always endeavour to do the best we can for our employers, whether our own pockets suffer or not. I assure you, Madam, you will have one of the most magnificent residences in the west of England. Lord Manby (no, it was Sir Gosling) said to me only last Saturday: 'What I admire in your plans, Mr. Bilderbit, is their size, their spaciousness, their grand dimensions, if I may use the term.' I built Sir Gosling's new dining-room for him, Madam, and I can assure you it was the finest sight I have ever seen, a large dinner-party we had there lately, on the occasion of his being appointed High Sheriff: you will hardly believe it, Madam, but behind every guest's chair there was a footman six feet two inches without his shoes; Sir Gosling never admits any into his service under that height."

"I suppose, Mr. Bilderbit, it is with a similar view you have made the dining-room here so lofty," said Lucy Akehurst, who had entered during the latter

part of the discussion, and had hitherto sate with Charles almost in silence ; as much amused with the interview as her vexation at the threatened demolition of dear old Cheveleigh (every stone of which she knew and loved) would admit. The architect laughed rather too patronisingly, and Mrs. Akehurst did not laugh at all. Lucy was no favourite ; and as she never could resist the merry sally that rose to her lips as if by instinct, she was frequently in scrapes. Seeing Mr. Bilderbit preparing for his departure, she made her escape from the room while Charles was collecting the plans of new Cheveleigh, and started for a walk she had been all the morning meditating to the village.

It was now spring, as spring goes in England ; that is to say, the winter had relaxed into a fortnight of "muggy" weather, followed by a north-east wind and a sharp frost. Some traces of the late heavy snow, not yet melted, lay in various hollows under the thorns and broken knolls of the park, and the ground, suddenly caked again after the thaw, was stiff and unelastic to the tread. Lucy's way lay through the upper part of the park, where a footpath, considerably shorter than the carriage drive already mentioned, struck steeply up the rising ground at the back of the house, and then descended less

rapidly to the church and village. The day was ungenial; no sun, and a hard grey sky; and as Lucy followed the well-known path, familiar to her in happier years, the gloomy colouring of surrounding objects seemed in union with her own feelings. Lucy's mind was far indeed from having recovered itself from the blow which had fallen upon it so crushingly. From Mrs. Akehurst, as the reader may suppose, Lucy (although she struggled against the conviction in every form of duteous observance, respect and gentle intercourse) had no real companionship to hope for; while Charles was too young to be much of a companion to her, even had their natures been more similar. But Charles, although generous and ardent, had none of the deep thought and feeling which in his sister rose up every now and then to the surface, striking the observer all the more from its contrast to her usual light-hearted joyousness: it was like the military mass of some continental church, where, as the service advances to its more solemn periods, the deep notes of the organ peal along the vaulted aisle, mingling with and gradually subduing the lighter and more florid strains of the orchestral accompaniment. Accordingly, Lucy Akehurst felt painfully her present want of sympathy. Her father, who had doted on her, and

was never thoroughly happy when she was out of his sight, had praised and admired the rich nature, the soul of poetry and feeling, which he might not perhaps have had the ability to reciprocate or follow into its depths; and Lucy was never more happy than when she had induced him to throw aside accounts and business, and join her in a ride, enlivened by many a playful discussion (in which some sprightly jest or quaint thought, half humorous and half pathetic, always insured her the victory), over Braildon Hill or the Long Moor. The memory of one of these happy rides probably recurred to her now, as she paused on the brow of the hill which looked down upon the Court, rising in every variety of picturesque detail behind a dark clump of the ilex. The past and the present rushed upon her mind in vivid contrast. For one moment, she saw her father's form, as he stood to lift her on her horse, or whistled to his dogs on his return from a day's shooting; she heard his loud, good-tempered voice in the house; she penetrated to his especial sanctum (a study dressing-room on the ground floor), to which no one had access but herself, and felt his warm kiss on her cheek, and saw the smile of pride and pleasure with which he looked up into the half-teasing, half-coaxing face that hung over him. And then abruptly and

sternly rose before her the blank present ; the hand, the voice, the eye, cold, mute, and dark for ever in their solitary grave ; no one to understand or love her as he had done ; his very home about to be rooted up, as it were, from the ground, the victim of a senseless caprice, and replaced by a structure which Lucy's fine natural taste taught her, even without architectural knowledge, was no less absurd and ugly than it was extravagant. Lucy's heart fairly gave way at the thoughts thus presented to her, and cold as the day was, she sate down on the crooked gnarled trunk of a large thorn, one of a clump which grew just under the brow of the hill, and wept long and bitterly, until the sound of footsteps approaching on the other side, warned her to proceed in that direction. She hastily dried her tears and descended ; but they almost broke out again at the spectacle which now presented itself, just as she met the person she had heard approaching ; a hard-featured man, hardly a gentleman, although above the middle classes, and with a singularly disagreeable expression in his small twinkling eye and firm-set mouth and features. He was a stranger by sight to Lucy, but he appeared to know her, for he raised his hat obsequiously to her in passing ; and she soon forgot the circumstance in the overpowering inte-

rest of the scene which now lay before her. We have said that the footpath between the Court and the village descended less rapidly towards the latter than on the other side ; it in fact pursued the side of a broad curving glade, rising with a moderate inclination from the valley in which the village was situated, and bordered with magnificent timber, principally deciduous, but forming even in winter, with the stately trunks and delicate interlacing tracery of the upper branches, a scene of beauty which almost compensated for the loss of leaves. At the foot of the hill the glade swept away in an opposite direction to the village, which was reached by again climbing a steep wooded knoll, immediately under which lay the church and churchyard, the footpath leading through the latter into the small street. The whole of this glade was out of sight of the carriage road, and from its beauty and seclusion (for the footpath led only to the Court, and was little used except by the family) had been a great favourite with Lucy. There was no stream through it, but the level grass sward, reaching from side to side of the entire sweep, afforded a delightful canter to her pony ; while the choicest flowers and ferns of the neighbourhood grew in profusion under the trees. During the late winter, however, the heavy snow

had prevented Lucy from pursuing this path, while in the fortnight of milder weather which succeeded it, she had been absent from Cheveleigh, on a visit to a relative residing in one of the Midland Counties, from which she had only returned the day before that on which the present chapter opens. It was therefore with emotions of absolute consternation, almost with incredulity, that Lucy Akehurst gazed at the transformation which had been effected since her last visit, and which we shall now briefly describe.

Immediately underneath her, in the upper part of the glade, the ground had been excavated for a huge reservoir. The arched mouth of a tunnel for water, completed for a few feet into the earth, yawned at one side of this, and was evidently intended to proceed underground in the direction of a natural pond, which formed the head of a valley at some distance, narrower and more rocky than that we have been describing, and through which the water of the pond found its exit in a stream of some size. From the bottom of the new reservoir descended a broad flight of steps, also partially completed: a straight channel communicating with a similar flight of steps succeeded; and preparations for a corresponding system of steps and water-courses had commenced in various places down to the bottom of the hill, where a large artificial lake

was also in progress of formation. The hard frost had compelled the cessation of the works for the present, and they lay in all their nakedness and deformity; the fair green sward trampled with labourers' feet, and torn up with heavy waggon and cart wheels; here, an excavator's pick or shovel planted upright in the ground, there a pile of bricks or a wheelbarrow overturned and half imbedded in the mud of the late thaw, but which had now grown hard and stiff over it; one or two of the noblest trees (Lucy knew them all as individuals, almost had separate names for them) felled for use in the works; every feature of natural beauty marred or disfigured in some point; and the whole wearing as ungainly an appearance as improvements in progress usually do, and ten times more so in the light of the dull, stolid-looking day, and the iron frost, in which surrounding objects stood out as stark and rigid as skeletons. These, then, were the new water-works! Lucy had heard the scheme mentioned, but not the site; indeed, during the depth of winter, although the line of the cascades had been marked out, and other preparations made, the actual works had not commenced. When the weather relaxed, however, the workmen were put on, and operations were commenced vigorously, under the auspices of Mr. Bilderbit, who, besides

planning the system of cascades above described, had produced various elaborate designs for grottoes, alcoves, fountains, and basins, garnished with shivering statues, and (as his *chef-d'œuvre*) a zinc spouting-tree in a side walk among shrubs, supplied from the reservoir, and which, by turning a concealed tap, might be made to discharge its contents, through small tubes and apertures in the leaves, upon the unwary nymph or swain who approached its retreat too closely. The absence of water had been at first a great obstacle, but Mr. Bilderbit's genius, never at a loss for resources, had discovered that the pond already noticed would give a never-failing supply, and, as it lay nearly on the level with the first cascade, had determined on half a mile of tunnel to connect the two. Accordingly, everything was now proceeding, or had been until the frost commenced, with perfect success and at no trifling cost;—but this was nothing to Mr. Bilderbit. Lucy had only returned late on the previous evening, and Charles and Mrs. Akehurst had, as it happened, both been fully occupied during the forenoon, the latter with the details of Mr. Bilderbit's designs for the house, the former in trying the rabbit-warren on Braildon Hill with a new ferret; hence it happened that the subjects of the *jets-d'eau*, although a favourite topic with Mrs.

Akehurst, had accidentally not been mentioned, and the spectacle before her broke on Lucy like a thunderclap.

Hers was a very gentle nature, but she could have felt real anger then; perhaps she might have done so and forfeited the reader's good opinion, but the errand on which she was bound subdued the exclamation, almost the cry of grief and mortification which was rising to her lips; and with a few hot tears on her cheek and a quick step she pursued her way to the village.

Lucy Akehurst was a great favourite in the little hamlet; the very stones of it almost worshipped her. There was not a man, woman, or child among the cottagers who had not, at some time or other, been the better for Lucy's gentle ministrations. Mrs. Akehurst had been brought up as a good and frugal housekeeper, and, notwithstanding the affluence in which she was placed by her marriage, had a pleasure in superintending domestic details; it was one of the few things she did well. Her accomplishments under this head she had communicated to Lucy; and few young ladies of the present day would form even a conception of the science and dexterous manipulation with which the young fairy of Cheveleigh Court presided (and occasionally assisted) at

the mysteries of confections and preserves, fancy bread, and whipped cream; her vocation, moreover, extending to various other details of good housewifery, and even to the medicine chest, and the resources of domestic surgery, in which she was no inconsiderable adept. Combined with these useful qualities, in the exercise of which the sick and infirm of the hamlet had a large share, Lucy had a fund of strong sense, a ready tact, and quick perception of character, which, with her gentle hand and kind heart, and above all, the singular fascination, almost the magic of the rapid contrast of joyous mirth—beaming to her eyes, and glancing in every graceful movement and every tread of her quick light foot—with the deep tenderness and compassion with which she ministered to grief and pain, made her presence as it had been that of an angel among the plain, wondering folk of Cheveleigh. The very dogs seemed to know her step; and as for the children, she was pushed and dragged by them into every species of game without remorse, until some grave dame or village senior would interpose the rod of authority, and disperse her tormentors with the question, “Why didn’t they mind their *’havings*, and not be a pussivanting the young lady up and down the village thic ere way?” And yet Lucy was no

Lady Bountiful; at least what she did was wholly without self-consciousness. She spoke and acted, smiled and sorrowed, tended the sick and weakly, pitied the erring, patted the curly heads of the little boys, and frowned on the girls when they soiled their frocks or white pinafores, just as part of her every-day life, without its even entering her mind to consider whether she was doing anything laudable, or playing the part of a patroness with her dependents. Mercilessly indeed would the young lady have laughed at any one who had called her so.

We have intimated that Lucy's present errand to the village was a sorrowful one. It could hardly be otherwise; and yet sorrowful was almost the last word which Lucy herself, or the person most interested in her visits, would probably have applied to them. The latter was a young woman, two or three years only Lucy's senior, and who, like her, had (with one younger brother) been left fatherless some little time before. The parents of Letty Graves had resided in a village a few miles distant from Cheveleigh, where the advantages of an excellent school, united with a nature at once intelligent and docile, had given her a refinement and thoughtfulness rarely found in her station. Since her mother's death, which took place a few years previously,

Letty had been in service; her brother worked at the large farmer's of the parish. Letty's strength had always been unequal to her situation; latterly it had declined still more; and on her father's death she was compelled to come and live at Cheveleigh with her mother's father, Ralph Sunningly, one of the most respectable day-labourers and oldest inhabitants of the village. Her brother remained at the farm, and sent such few pence as he could spare from his boy's wages for the support of his sister; which she herself eked out, poorly enough, with needle-work, and occasionally looking after a neighbour's children, or helping in the cottages round. During the winter even this scanty provision had failed; the seeds of consumption had been sown, and the bright eye and easily-flushing cheek, by which the disorder signals its first approach, were quickly followed by a hard dry cough, a weary pain in the side, and difficulty of respiration, and the other symptoms (alas! only too familiar in our humid climate) which indicate its more rapid advances. Slowly and mournfully, one morning after Christmas, did poor Letty mount the staircase to her little room (from which she had descended only half an hour before), with the conviction that henceforth she could do nothing to mitigate the burthen which her

maintenance had thrown upon the grey-haired old couple, who sate by the fire-side, saying nothing indeed, but with a meaning wistful look in both their faces, directed towards the retreating form, which spoke volumes. Old Ralph doated on the fair wan face, which seemed to call back to his hearth his only daughter; but he could do little now to meet the expense of an additional inmate, and an invalid. The little Rector, whose fortunes ought to have been as large as his heart, was well nigh the poorest man in his parish; his limited income had many claims upon it; and he must dress in black, not fustian. Till lately, indeed, this had been of far less consequence; the stream of aid from Cheveleigh Court, the natural resort of poverty and sickness in those whose dwellings clustered round its gate, had flowed largely and unremittingly; but since Mr. Akehurst's death, with the exception of a few pompous donations at rare intervals from his widow, this supply had been entirely withdrawn. Even Lucy's help was much circumscribed, for she no longer received the liberal allowance with which her father had loved to anticipate every wish of his favourite child. What she required personally was supplied, often with far greater costliness and profusion than she could have wished; but there was no

longer any fund to call her own, or to draw upon for the wants of others; and excepting the medicines and occasional dainties for the sick which she was allowed to supply from the housekeeping department, she had the mortification of now visiting her poor people empty-handed. The winter, accordingly, one of unusual severity in the west, had pressed heavily upon Ralph; but still he bore up long and nobly against it; if there were difficulties, at any rate Letty was never allowed to know them or feel their consequences; and many a time when the orange, or the glass of port wine, stood by the bedside of the invalid upstairs, the old people supped contentedly on a meal which had dwindled to a crust of black bread and a draught of water. But notwithstanding all efforts and self-sacrifices, things had been getting from bad to worse; and the worst was now pretty nigh come.

Hearty as ever, and very respectful at the same time, was the welcome with which old Ralph and his wife greeted their young visitor. Her warm sympathy identified her too much with themselves to make them ever speculate upon its more substantial expressions; from her hand this seemed to flow as a matter of course; when given, they thanked heaven, not for it, but for her; and now that it was perforce

withheld, they had an intuitive perception of circumstances which Lucy would have given worlds to have had known, if her doing so could have inferred no stigma upon others. At the present moment, indeed, she was too anxious to learn how her patient had fared during her absence to feel the mortification she now usually experienced in these visits ; and with a swift, low step, after a few words to the old people, she mounted the stairs.

“ Letty, dear Letty ! ” Poor Lucy could not force any brighter salutation from her lips ; she had some difficulty in saying even this, for she was shocked and startled at the alteration made by even three weeks. The new water-works and Mr. Bilderbit’s other vexations were now mere specks upon the horizon. The thin fingers stretched on the coverlid gently clasped hers as she touched them, pressing at the same time a long kiss—how full of life and health the lips seemed—upon the sufferer’s pale, hollow cheek.

“ I have been expecting to see you to-day, Miss Akehurst ”——

“ No ; Lucy, if you please, dear Letty. Miss Lucy, if it will make you happier.”

“ I thought you would come to-day, Miss Lucy. I felt happier and stronger this morning, and better able to talk than I have done for some days, and I

“Well, Letty, perhaps it is a sign you are to get strong and well again. You know who wishes it may be so.”

“Thank you, Miss Lucy; I must not look for that, I believe; I ought not to wish it, perhaps, and I don’t know that I do, excepting for the old people down stairs, who will be sore lonesome when I leave them. And yet I certainly do feel much better and stronger to-day. But I was going to say, Miss Lucy, this is not exactly what I meant when I said I felt quite young again; it is something which I can hardly explain, even to myself, but I will try. Dear, kind Dr. Davis has been here this morning,—I dare say grandfather will have told you why he came to-day,—I was very unworthy to receive what he brought me, and I had too much neglected it when I was strong and in health and spirits; but his coming cheered me much, and Mrs. Davis was there with grandfather and grandmother both. When they went away, I was tired, and slept: I awoke, I believe, soon afterwards, and then the feeling I have spoken of came upon me again. It did not, as before, seem to make everything so unspeakably bright round me, and make me joyous and light-hearted; on the contrary, it was very solemn, and it made me feel young in a different

way,—as if I had only lived a short time, and was in a new world, where everything was unknown and wonderful,—as if all I had ever said and done in life, and particularly all the trouble, and worry, and pain I have had, and all that I have ever been anxious or unhappy about, had never been at all, but I had been dreaming it. I was not alone, either, for the room, I thought, was full of faces round me,—all strange to me,—as they used to seem when I was a child; and yet, when they all smiled and looked pleasantly on me, it seemed to me as if I must have seen them before at some time I could not recollect. And then, presently, I really saw my dear father and mother there, and I saw, too, such beautiful forms of angels, so very bright and glorious, standing near them. I don't know if you have ever been in a cathedral, Miss Lucy. I was in one some years ago during the service; and, as I stood and listened, the carved faces in the stone roof and in the woodwork of the choir (as they call it), and the figures of the saints and angels in the painted windows seemed all of a sudden to become so bright and large and full of life, as if they were the only things in the church, and all the people in the seats and the choristers and singing men had never been there at all. It was something like this I felt to-day,

Miss Lucy, only so much more wonderful. But I am afraid you will hardly make out what I mean to express, and I am keeping you, too, so long up in the cold here."

"I am afraid, Letty, you are doing yourself no good by so much talking, which, indeed, you must not do, although I dearly love to hear you talk. But who is that speaking so loud, down stairs? I have heard it for some time past?"

"I did not hear any one," answered Letty. But the sounds were audible enough: one voice, in harsh, peremptory tones, apparently enforcing some demand or claim; while old Ralph from time to time interposed a few words, more as if in deprecation of the disturbance to Letty than as if he were replying to the person addressing him. Lucy hastened down stairs.

In the lower room stood the stranger whom Lucy had encountered on her way to the village. She would have found it difficult to account to herself for the involuntary shudder,—a sensation beyond mere repugnance,—which the appearance of this person gave her; and she now recollected that she had experienced the same feeling on meeting him in the morning, although the disturbance of mind caused by Mr. Bilderbit's improvements, and the

conversation with Letty, had prevented her reverting to it until now. Repulsive, indeed, the stranger's face and manner both were, especially as he now stood with his back partially turned to the staircase-door by which Lucy had entered, confronting, and, as it were, menacing old Ralph; but still it was something beyond the mere look of the man which chilled the blood at Lucy's heart so suddenly, almost fixing her to the spot by the fascination of an irrepressible terror. She had no time, however, to analyse her own sensations. The intruder (who apparently had not observed her entrance) continued speaking in the same harsh tones as before. "What do I know about your sick wench, man? I dare say it's all gammon; she'll be well enough, I've no doubt, to tramp away with you all to the workhouse, or the jail perhaps would be the better place; but that's no concern of mine: I've only to see the money's paid, and so it shall be before the day's two hours later, or some of these old pots and pans shall go for what they are worth. There's Giles and Standish, from W——, are on their road here by this time, I expect, and they'll make a little clearance on the premises." The speaker glanced round, as he spoke, at the handsome walnut-wood dresser, with its triple row of bright pewter and

stainless crockery,—a purchase that dated from old Ralph's marriage,—and to which the loud-ticking eight-day clock, folding mahogany table, piled with the literary treasures of the family, high-backed settle, and other articles of furniture in the comfortable kitchen had from time to time been added, when work was plentiful, and the children pretty well off his hands. In turning, the stranger saw Lucy, and his tone instantly changed. "I beg ten thousand pardons, Miss Akehurst. I had no idea you were in the room. A painful duty this, Miss, which we have sometimes to discharge in our profession; but the remedies of the law must be enforced, and I have given these people warnings enough already." The words were accompanied with a bow, meant to be gentlemanly, but which really was cringing and obsequious; and before Lucy could reply, she was left alone with the old couple.

"What is all this about, Ralph?" asked Lucy. "Letty seems not to have heard it, but I feared it would soon have disturbed her, and I hurried down to stop the noise."

"Only a debt, Miss Lucy, only a debt; a small sum enough, but more than I can pay just now, and the law must have its way," half muttered the old man, who had sat down on the oak settle. But his wife,

equally right-hearted in grain, but incapable of the delicacy—the true peasant's aristocracy of feeling—which nature had implanted in Ralph, interposed with more explicitness. “No, Miss, it's no debt, although he calls it so; it's a distress for rent. There's six pounds five due, besides the matter of a guinea and a half for law expenses; and unless it's ready for him when he comes back, Lawyer Butler (that's he that was here just now) will seize the furniture, he says, and he's the man to do it too. And we're to be turned out of the house, at any rate, for he has let it over our heads to a new tenant, who will pay more for it.”

“Rent!” echoed Lucy, in some astonishment; “turned out!—what do you mean, Granny? I always thought the house was your own, at least for old Ralph's life; I am sure dear papa has often told me so.”

“Your father, Miss Akehurst, was my good, kind master,” said Ralph; “may God bless him; it would be better for some of us poor people if he were alive now. As you say, he always told me I should live here rent free, and I hoped to live and die here; but I suppose he never put it down in writing, and times are changed now. Whilom, I hoped to get on, and manage to pay my way; but I am not so young and able to work as I was, and Mr. Butler (he's your

mother's new agent, Miss, the lawyer at W——) is a hard, bitter man ; and somehow times has been very hard for poor people to live this winter. And then poor Letty's illness (although I would never let her know it, sweet angel) has kept us down ; and so altogether there is this rent behind, and a small matter of anything to pay it with ; and so I suppose the old chairs and tables must go to the brokers. Don't grieve, Miss Lucy, dear lamb. I don't say nought against your mother for it ; for of course the tenants must pay their rent, small as well as large, and she only asks for what the law gives her. And I dare say there'll be some bit of a cottage where the old woman and I can go into, and our time can't be much longer now ; but 'deed, Miss Lucy, I *am* troubled about our darling up stairs. I almost wish the end (for it *is* pretty near the end now) could have come before this happened."

"It's impossible," cried Lucy, who had hardly listened to the simple but touching history of the old man, "I am quite sure my mother does not know of this ; it is some blunder or perverseness of that man Butler (if that is his name), whom I disliked the instant I saw him. I will go home instantly and bring my mother's order to stop this ; I shall be back again before any one comes." And Lucy darted from the

house, at full speed, almost overturning some half dozen of her youthful playmates, who had seen her enter the cottage, and were waiting for a romp with her as she came out. Old Ralph slowly shook his head and sank back on the settle.

Mrs. Akehurst was prepared for something of a scene on her daughter's return, but one of a different description. She had seen the path by which Lucy left the house, and although Mrs. Akehurst could not enter into her daughter's more refined tastes, or comprehend her grief at the elaborate piece of folly which Mr. Bilderbit had intruded on one of the fairest scenes of Cheveleigh Park, it still did occur to her as possible, that Lucy, uncomplaining and dutiful as she generally was, might express some dismay at the projected innovation. So Mrs. Akehurst, on her daughter's return, took her ground accordingly.

"Well, Lucy, I hope you are pleased with the improvements in the Park; you see I had prepared quite a surprise for you. Mr. Bilderbit says it will be a miniature Versailles when it is finished; there will be plenty of water, he says, provided we keep it dammed up in the reservoir, and don't let it be always running. When any one wants to see the cascade, one of the gardeners must come and turn the cock, which communicates with the sluice under-

ground; Mr. Bilderbit has managed so cleverly to put this behind an alcove, so that you need not see it. I was saying to Lady Emily—" Here Mrs. Akehurst stopped for breath, and Lucy seized the opportunity.

"Oh! Mamma, we will talk about that some other time. I don't like the alteration at all, I think it dreadful, but it is not that. Poor Letty Graves is so ill, so very ill, I don't think she can last many days longer, and then your agent, Mr. Butler (is that his name?) has actually turned them out of the cottage, and poor old Ralph's furniture is to be seized for rent this afternoon. I am sure, Mamma, you did not know of this; I told old Ralph so; but if you would just write me an order to stop it, I would run down with it at once, before any mischief was done."

Mrs. Akehurst's brow darkened. "I should be much better pleased, Lucy, if you would have the goodness not to interfere in my affairs. I know nothing about the particular case you mention, but Mr. Butler has my express authority to act as he may judge best. And it really seems very hard that you should not consider the trouble and grief I have to bear sufficient, without adding to it by your meddling and undutiful conduct."

"But, Mamma, poor old Ralph; you can never

mean to turn him out of his house ; and Letty too, in her state, poor girl !”

“ I don’t know what you mean by her state, Lucy,” replied Mrs. Akehurst ; “ I can only say one of the people came up from the village with eggs just now, and I heard her tell the housekeeper that the young woman seemed quite strong again this morning, and spoke as if she was going to get well. As to Ralph Sunningly, there is no possible reason why he should not pay his rent like other people ; and if he is behind-hand, I suppose he must take the consequences ; I really cannot interfere in cases like this between my agent and the tenants.”

“ But old Ralph, Mamma,” persisted Lucy, “ is so different from the rest ; he is so respectable, and has lived in the cottage so long ; and I am sure he would not have been behind-hand now, but for Letty’s illness. Besides, Mamma, I distinctly remember papa saying more than once that old Ralph had the cottage rent-free, and that he meant him to have it so for the rest of his life.”

“ If your father did make any foolish promise of the kind,” replied Mrs. Akehurst, “ he certainly never expressed his wishes to me ; and there is nothing left in writing to show that he did so. But I suspect in this case you have allowed the old

man to impose upon you. Mr. Butler tells me that the people in the cottage are eternally quoting something or other of the kind against your poor dear father, as if it was likely he would allow the property to be sacrificed in that way. I have never liked that old Sunningly and his wife ; and I believe they make the most of their granddaughter's illness, seeing you so generous and easily imposed upon. I assure you, my dear, I cannot afford anything of the kind. I have very heavy demands upon me just now ; and in the summer, Charles will be going to Eton, which will be a further expense." (And here be it observed that Mrs. Akehurst was quite accurate when she spoke of there being serious claims upon her purse ; self-created claims, indeed, the offspring of selfishness and caprice, which spared no cost for its personal gratification, even on objects the most trifling and ridiculous ; but still claims which altogether reached a very serious total. In fact, although still preserving both in manner and conversation the attributes of the deepest affliction, Mrs. Akehurst had already begun to launch out extensively into an extravagance in matters of equipage, dress, table, and decoration, which derived the keener zest from its enjoyment having been so long restrained, and which had already begun to draw heavily even upon

her noble income; while the resumption of general visiting (to which she looked forward in the course of a few months), and the projected "improvements" in the house and grounds, threatened a still more formidable outlay. Accordingly, it was not without some pressure from head-quarters that Mr. Butler had commenced in various instances the system of harsh and rigorous exaction towards the tenantry, of which his treatment of old Sunningly is a specimen; there being at the same time a kind of theory kept up, which probably hardly imposed even upon Mrs. Akehurst herself, that in this process, a new one at Cheveleigh, of screwing up the rents to their highest pitch the agent should be solely responsible for the details.)

Her mother's last words had somewhat cheered Lucy. "Oh! if that is all, dear Mamma," she exclaimed, "do let the loss fall on me. There is that new mourning brooch you ordered for me in town, which was so expensive; it has not been sent yet, and indeed, indeed I could do without it. Oh! I could not bear to wear it, Mamma, and think that the poor people were driven out of their house for a less sum than that would cost. If you would only, dearest Mamma, tell Mr. Butler to excuse them the rent, if only this time, and let me go without the brooch."

“Nonsense, Lucy ; and have you dressed just like a pauper ; a likely thing indeed. I wonder you can find pleasure in vexing me so, Lucy, and mentioning your poor father’s name, too, so unguardedly. And now it is quite time for you to dress for dinner, and I beg you will let me hear no more of such Quixotic fancies.”

With a heavy, heavy heart, and almost bursting with grief, and a peculiar feeling of helplessness and desolation, Lucy, trembling for her swollen eyes and hot cheek, descended from her room at the last moment after the dinner-bell had sounded to which she could decently prolong her appearance. But she was to be spared the endurance of sitting out the long formal meal. Before the first course was removed, a slight bustle took place outside the door : a footman presently brought in the message which had caused the commotion. “It was one of the people from the village,” he said, “who had brought word that the young woman in Sunningly’s cottage was dying ; the doctor said she could not live many hours, and she had begged hard that Miss Akehurst might come and see her at once.”

“Oh ! Mamma, I *must* go ; I must indeed,” exclaimed Lucy ; “dearest Mamma, do let me go down ; I should never be happy again if I were not

viour; as it was, he accosted him insolently and familiarly. "Well, Doctor, we were just wanting you; here's some old divinity to be had very cheap."

"Peace be to this house, and to all within it," was the Doctor's only reply, as he paused before Ralph's seat. The old man looked up at the friendly voice. "Well, Ralph, I see what is going on; you should have told me you were in trouble before, man. How much is it?"

"A matter of seven pounds and more," was the answer. The good Doctor hesitated a minute and looked perplexed. "I did not think it could have been so much," he said, half aloud. "However, let's see; this old coat is quite good yet" (glancing down at his own sleeve, which, alas! rather belied the worthy man's assurance); "it will do another year at least. And then Nancy will find something or other she can save in housekeeping; besides, it must be done at all hazards. Come, my good friends," continued the Doctor aloud, addressing the two bailiffs, "I know you are only discharging your duty, and of course the money must be paid. Now, I am not a rich man; the sum you are in possession for is more than I have about me, or, in fact, than I can command at present anywhere; but if you will leave this poor man's property unmolested, I give

you my word of honour as a clergyman, and I will give this gentleman" (the word rather stuck in the Doctor's throat) "who, I presume, is your employer, any legal security which he may require, that the money shall be forthcoming this day month with all interest and costs."

The men hesitated and looked at Butler, who answered insolently, "Thank you, Doctor; but I'm afraid we should not make much out of your bombazine gown and old sermons, which I suppose are the only security you have to offer us. No, my good sir, business is business, 'a bird in the hand,' you know, Dr. Davis. Now then, Standish, look sharp; it's only the parson, you booby; you stand staring as if you had seen a ghost. Here, give me a hand with this flap table, and let's see what it's like." But the next moment Mr. Butler's face betrayed a consternation quite as remarkable as that of his followers; for in the doorway, which, as we have already mentioned, communicated with the small staircase leading to the upper rooms, stood a pale, unearthly figure, appalled in white from head to foot, and contrasting strangely with the rough, hard-favoured men who now occupied the kitchen. It was poor Letty. On Lucy's departure she had sunk into a profound sleep, which still continued, for her eyes

were closed even as she advanced into the room. Apparently she had been in some dream, with which the voices down stairs blended; and rising from her bed, unconscious of what she was doing, had proceeded in the direction from which they came. Butler had stooped to drag the table forward, and found Letty's figure confronting him, as he looked round to see what prevented his orders being obeyed. A thorough coward, as all bullies are, he recoiled in terror, quitting his hold of the table suddenly, and fell forward with his head against the oak settle.

The noise awoke Letty; she stopped in her advance with a cry of wild terror; the light, the strange forms, the confusion of well-known objects in the room, her own presence there, the suddenness with which she had been disturbed from sleep, altogether proved too much for her attenuated frame (in which for a few hours that morning the waning life had flickered up with a last effort), and with a low cough, followed by a violent rush of blood from the mouth, Letty sank into the Doctor's arms, who supported her on to the settle. No one had cared, in fact the time had hardly sufficed, to raise the prostrate Butler; and a quantity of the blood from the poor girl's mouth streamed on his hands and clothes. Think you, reader, he will remember

it years hence; when in a foreign clime, and a chamber of gloom and darkness, he shall again lie prostrate, helpless and blood-besmeared; not from the lips of the angel girl whose death he has hastened, but from the fangs and teeth of his demon-assailants, summoned to their carnival by his own unexpiated crime?

A few words will suffice to tell the rest. Butler, who had been slightly stunned by his fall, rose and withdrew from the cottage; the men would not have persisted in their seizure even if he had ordered it; but he had had enough for that day. A surgeon was soon on the spot; he gave no hope, but thought it possible Letty might survive some hours. Hardly indeed might it seem so; for the fatal stream, the life-blood of that gentle, blameless heart, welled forth, darkly, copiously, and almost unremittingly. Once it partially ceased, and Letty spoke; the only words audible were "Miss Lucy," "God bless"—A messenger was at once despatched to the Court by Dr. Davis, but it was too late. The blood suddenly ceased to flow; a gurgling and low rattle in the throat followed; and with one sigh the spirit parted for its long sleep.

The crowd at the door was unabated when the carriage from the great house drove down: its

occupant was not at first recognised, and at sight of the liveries a general murmur, and even some cries of "Shame" arose from the poor cottagers, in whom the old devotion to the house of Cheveleigh was much on the wane since Mr. Butler's proceedings had commenced. The sounds, however, were unnoticed by Lucy, who stepped hastily from the carriage, the villagers making way for her respectfully and readily; for none ever associated shame with *her* name. The paper with her mother's signature had never quitted her hand; she was half across the room, in her eagerness to leave it with Ralph, and hasten upstairs to Letty's room, before the altered state of things in the cottage arrested her gaze. One hasty glance told the story; it ran momentarily over the whole scene; the displaced furniture, the disorder of the well-sanded floor (from which the traces of blood had been hastily removed); the mute sympathy of one or two of the neighbours, who had felt privileged to enter the house of mourning; the old clergyman, striving hard to master his own choking utterance, as he breathed from time to time a few syllables of comfort and trust in his Divine Master's love; old Ralph, tearless, and nerved to the utmost to support his wife, whose bitter grief could not refrain from loud, heart-piercing cries and sobs; while

side by side with all, stretched on the low settle where she had fallen, a shawl or some other covering loosely thrown over her, but not concealing the face, lay the inanimate form of poor Letty; a sweet, bright smile, the smile of her own young days, playing, as if in life and health, upon her lips. Lucy Akehurst half sobbed "Oh! Mother," and hid her face on the clergyman's arm.

The week following, on a morning of violent and almost incessant rain, Letty's funeral took place in Cheveleigh churchyard. The weather was such that Lucy, to her bitter disappointment, was not allowed to attend; but it did not preclude a large concourse of the parishioners, as well as some others from a distance, who followed the body reverently, and almost tenderly, to its place of interment. The ceremony took place during an interval of the drenching showers, and for one moment, as the words were read in which the bystanders were exhorted "not to sorrow as those who had no hope," a gleam of sunshine broke through the clouds, and rested on the open grave and its peaceful occupant. After the conclusion of the service many of the spectators lingered on the spot; but they were soon

dispersed by the rain, which returned with increased violence. Old Ralph, with his wife, were the last who quitted the churchyard. Many an honest heart ached for them as they returned up the village to their now desolate home; from which, a few days afterwards, they removed to a parish at some distance, and were lost sight of in the neighbourhood.

A plain, ivy-grown cross of wood, and a green turf grave, point out to those who knew and loved her, the last earthly resting-place of the gentle-hearted daughter of the poor.

CHAP. III.

“What adverse destiny of life

First prompted the ill-omened strife?”

HOM. *Il.* l. 8.

ON the afternoon of the day which had witnessed Letty Graves' funeral, Charles Akehurst was on his way home from W——, the market-town to which we have already more than once referred. The hard rain of the morning had cleared up, and was replaced by a warm bright day; and as Charles's favourite pony had gone lame for some little time past, he took advantage of the improvement in the weather to ride it in to the farrier's at W——. The farrier's report was not encouraging; the animal had a bad strain, which it would require some weeks, at least, to remove. Blistering was recommended in the first instance, and the pony being left at W—— for that purpose, Charles was returning on foot, with a considerable amount of chagrin, to Cheveleigh. The ground had so much dried after the rain, that Charles

decided on returning home by a field-way, which was both shorter and pleasanter. The afternoon was, indeed, delightful; the birds carolled from bough to bough; along the copses, in the dingle hollows, over the sloping banks and knolls of the meadow side, clustered the myriad flowers of spring, carpeting the ground as if with embroidery. The tufts of scented violet lurked in every nook, and the blue bells peered beneath the bare stems of the underwood, and added their fragrance to the air. It must be confessed that Charles did not turn a very observant eye upon these natural beauties. Boys have seldom the instinctive poetry of the other sex; and his mortification at Jenny's invalided condition made him even less disposed than usual to lavish much regard upon the unobtrusive sources of enjoyment which lay round his path. He walked rather moodily along, swinging his riding cane, and rarely looking up excepting when he vaulted a stile, or when some plashy pool in the meadow, the effects of the morning's rain, obliged him to make a considerable detour.

His attention, however, became more aroused as he followed the path down the steep wooded bank of a valley of some size which lay in its course, being, in fact, a continuation of that into which the waters of the pond mentioned in our last chapter discharged

themselves. The stream from the pond, although of considerable body, was usually calm and sluggish; but to-day it had risen rapidly from the heavy showers, and, during the forenoon, had almost reached the level of the banks. The cessation of the rain had prevented its flooding the meadow, and, during the last hour or two, it had fallen in height, although its impetuosity was still undiminished; and Charles followed the path by its side for some distance, interested in watching the red whirling eddies, the long branches of the thorns on the banks tossing violently in the current, and the fragments of fences and the foam from the more rocky part of its course borne wildly along the mid channel, or driven, as if for shelter, into the more tranquil backwater occasioned by the projection of some gnarled stump from the bank. At some distance down the valley the brook was crossed by a wooden footbridge, rather narrow, and with a double rail for the protection of passengers. The stream was broader here, and the bottom usually shallow and pebbly, although the water now reached to within a few feet of the planks, chafing and gurgling against the tall uprights and crosspieces which formed their support with an ominous sound. The bridge was not visible from the path at any distance, the stream making a consider-

able bend in this place among bushes which concealed it; and Charles, who had picked up some object which had floated to the water's edge and was examining it as he walked along, had his foot on the stone step leading up to the bridge, and was vaulting the low stile which kept the cattle from it, before he perceived that he was not alone there. A boy, probably about a year or two his senior, but smaller, although of a compact and athletic make, was leaning over one of the rails, looking down in a moody and rather abstracted way into the swollen stream. His dress was the usual one of a peasant, but apparently arranged with more care than usual—hardly a holiday dress either—while a black hat, clumsily covered with crape, gave an unusual character to his appearance. As the lad stood, Charles could not have passed. The suppressed chagrin of his previous walk got the better of him, and he called out, in no very courteous manner, for the other youth to move and let him go by. The boy turned his face; it was one of which Charles had no knowledge; an honest, frank face enough, with deep set, rather fine eyes, and an unusual delicacy of expression. He looked at Charles, whom he appeared to recognise, rather fixedly, and then slightly bent forward towards the rail. There was room enough now for Charles to pass; *just*

room enough, not an inch too much; and Charles's dignity felt outraged. He repeated his command (for it amounted to such) in a tone still more peremptory; it was disregarded; the lad maintained his position and again looked over the side of the bridge, throwing into the water from time to time the fragments of a small twig which he carried in his hand. The patrician blood was now roused, and Charles grew violent. "You had best get out of my way," he said, advancing towards the lad, and holding up his riding-whip in a threatening manner, "before I make you, my young fellow. Do you suppose I'm going to hustle by you in that style? Go back off the bridge, will you, and let me pass! Do you know who I am?" The lad replied firmly, but not with disrespect, still looking down into the water: "I do know who you are, Master Akehurst, and I shall not go back again; there is quite room enough for you to pass; and it is not because you wear a fine coat on your back that you are to order other people about as if they were cart-horses. As to *making* me, I should like to see you; I just advise you not to try, that's all," continued the boy, losing his temper in turn, as Charles, who was now close to him, shook his whip in a menacing way over his head.

"Take that, then, you young scamp," said Charles,

highly incensed, and bringing his whip down upon the other with a sharp, stinging blow. The lad started up; his deep eyes almost glared with passion at the smart. He did not strike Charles, but he collared him, and threw him back,—almost hurled him,—to one side of the bridge. “Yes, and take you *that*,” said the boy, “and if you come any more of your fine gentleman tricks, master, I’ll give you something that you’ll like still less. It wouldn’t be a bad opportunity of paying off an old score or two with your cursed family.”

Apparently the score, whatever it was, was nearer being paid off than the speaker anticipated: the words had hardly left his lips before a dry, snapping sound, succeeded by a cry of terror, and a heavy splash in the water, gave them an answer as unexpected as it was appalling. Charles had fallen against the hand-rail of the bridge opposite to that on which his adversary had leant: both the rails were old, and this one, in particular, was almost entirely decayed, a portion of it, in fact, being retained in its place only by a few nails. The weight suddenly thrown against the rail with such violence overcame this frail support, and the whole mass of wood-work was precipitated into the stream, Charles following. His opponent was courageous,

ready-witted, and active; his resentment had subsided almost before he closed with his assailant, and the danger of the latter now replaced every other emotion. The whole had occurred in less time than we have taken to describe it, and yet Charles was already some distance down the stream, borne along, apparently without the power of resistance, in the whirling eddies; at times completely covered, at others emerging from the water: he was now fast disappearing round a corner. His opponent's first thought had been to jump into the brook after him, but it was evidently hopeless; he now altered his plan, and ran at full speed across the strip of meadow which formed the base of another deep semicircle made by the river. He was just in time: as he again reached the bank, the current swept by, bearing its lifeless burden like a log. The lad plunged in fearlessly; he had removed part of his clothes, and, being a good swimmer, soon reached Charles, whom he caught by one arm, endeavouring to keep his head as much out of the water as possible, at the same time swimming with his disengaged hand, and guiding his course gradually towards the bank at a point where the stream was broader, and a small bay or indentation caused a backwater, out of reach of the main current, and comparatively

still and safe. It was not without difficulty that this point was reached, and the landing on the slippery bank proved more formidable than the lad had anticipated. It was only by his utmost efforts, and a strength disproportioned to his size, that he succeeded in reaching the top himself, still retaining a hold on his senseless burden, whom, however, it proved impossible to drag up after him.

But a feasible landing-place was now visible at a short distance down the stream,—a broad slope to the water's edge, by which, in the ordinary state of things, the cattle from the meadow came down to drink. To-day this had been covered by the water, which, an hour or two before, had advanced to the commencement of the declivity, although it had now much receded, and left the few last feet dry and covered with a firm hard gravel. It was a matter of no small difficulty to drag Charles into this kind of natural dock, but the lad stood to his task manfully, and at last succeeded in landing him on the dry, pebbly slope. The toil had been excessive; and, when the safety of both was insured, the lad's head, as he knelt on the ground by Charles's side, drooped for some minutes heavily on his chest, and he experienced a sensation of deadly faintness; the surrounding objects appearing still present to him

(although his eyes were closed), and swimming wildly before his brain.

His first thought, on recovering himself, was of his late antagonist. Charles still lay perfectly motionless, apparently not breathing. The lad handled him tenderly and kindly, and not without some knowledge of the proper treatment to be adopted, placing his head so as to allow of the water running from his mouth, and chafing his hands and temples. The result was still unsuccessful: a quarter of an hour or more had elapsed, and Charles gave no sign of life. The lad continued to kneel by him, still chafing at times, and looking in his face with an expression of intense anguish. At length he desisted from his efforts,—they had not awakened the slightest token of consciousness; the long eye-lashes never stirred from the face, the fingers remained stiff and clammy;—it was evidently hopeless: he was in the presence of a corpse. As he rose to his feet, he caught sight of a figure descending the path through the underwood which we have already described as leading down to the valley where the accident occurred; the path in this place was just visible from the part of the bank where the two boys had landed, and the motion of the figure, although too indistinct to be itself recognised, was

plainly seen through the copse, which was still almost bare of leaves. The lad seemed to reflect for a moment as to his best course: the figure came down at a quick pace through the brushwood; still he hesitated; at length, as it was about to turn the corner of the copse into the open meadow, he clasped his hands together over his head, and with a wild cry, "Oh! my God! and to-day, too,—*her* day!" he rushed from the spot, picking up the hat and jacket which he had taken off by the way, and, re-crossing the bridge, soon disappeared in a deep winding cartway which opened into the valley nearly opposite to the spot on which the occurrence we have described took place.

His flight was not seen. The foot passenger, whoever he was, proceeded leisurely along the level path, and had partly crossed the bridge, when his attention was arrested by the fragments of the broken rail, while at a short distance down lay Charles's hat, which had been caught on a projecting bough of one of the numerous bushes which fringed the stream. It was evident that some accident had occurred; and the new-comer, quitting the bridge, proceeded with a rapid step down the stream in quest of the person to whom the hat had belonged, the position of Charles on a slope below the general level of the bank pre-

venting him from being at first observed. While the search is proceeding, we will briefly apprise the reader of certain occurrences which had taken place at Cheveleigh Court meanwhile, and which, although comparatively unimportant in themselves, are not without some bearing on the future progress of our tale.

We have spoken in our first chapter of Oliver Cowdery, one of Mrs. Akehurst's tenants. Hawthornden Farm, which he rented, as his father had done before him, was of considerable extent, and Cowdery brought both capital and intelligence to its management; nowhere in the county were there cleaner fences, better drainage, or more remunerative crops; the farm-buildings were a model of neatness and arrangement, and the proprietor himself ruddy with prosperity and good humour. The favourable change in the weather, on the afternoon of poor Letty's funeral, tempted Oliver Cowdery forth, as it had done Charles Akehurst; and his business took him to Cheveleigh Court, where he had not been since Mr. Akehurst's death. The genial farewell of the landlord whom he had respected and loved rung in the worthy farmer's ear as he walked up the avenue; he paused at the hall-door, where health and strength had been stricken to the dust

so suddenly, and his heart swelled for a moment with that mute recognition of the dead, which is their more worthy monument than the marble bust or heraldic trappings; that which no money can buy, but which, under the fustian jacket or homely shawl, heaves many an honest heart, unsuspected, long after the memory of the kind friend or patron whom it depletes has become faint and dull where it might have looked to be most cherished. Cowdery rang the bell, and inquired for Mrs. Akehurst. That lady was at home and in a gracious mood. The tenant of Hawthornden was a person of importance, for his farm was high-rented, and the rent punctually paid: he had, moreover, a fund of humour and country-side anecdote, which made him a general favourite at Cheveleigh, where he had occasionally, in Mr. Akehurst's lifetime, joined the family dinner. After apologies for his intrusion, and a few words of very genuine condolence on the change which had taken place since his last visit, the farmer proceeded to state his business. "It's about that bit of land in Hawthornden bottom, Madam, just below our barton there; I don't know if you have ever noticed the place; the lane crosses the bottom not far from it. Your poor husband as good as promised that he would do some draining there for me, which the place

sadly wants; at present in wet weather you might sail a boat there. I dare say you know, Madam, that my lease runs out at Martinmas, and your good husband was disposed to think, as I did, that this bit of improvement would make us start fair for the new term; for of course my wife and I think of keeping on at the old place; that is to say, if you still approve of us as tenants."

"I have no doubt," replied Mrs. Akehurst, "that Mr. Butler will think proper to renew the lease; you are probably aware that he is my man of business now, and I leave the management of the property entirely to him; it had been a good deal neglected by Mr. Akehurst, who never liked employing an agent, and I fancy many of the people imposed upon his good-nature in consequence. The drainage you can mention to Mr. Butler at the same time, and I have no doubt, if it is reasonable, that he will recommend it being done, although I am unwilling to incur any great outlay just at present. Is there anything else you would wish to speak about, Mr. Cowdery?"

The manner of the speaker had been civil enough, and there was nothing in the words themselves which you could take hold of; and yet the speech jarred in some way upon the honest farmer's ear over and

above the necessity it entailed of an application to Butler, whom he knew and heartily disliked. Perhaps it was the want of cordiality in meeting the expressed doubt, but implied certainty, of the new lease which Cowdery was to have of Hawthornden, where he had lived, boy and man, for forty years and more, and from which he could no more imagine himself separated than he could have realised the Dart on fire; so that such allusions as he would occasionally make to the possibility of his quitting the farm seemed to him an excellent joke, which he was entitled to have well received. However this might be, the good man smothered some unpleasant sensations, repressing at the same time, with laudable prudence, a strong inclination to express to Mrs. Akehurst his conviction that her man of business was an unprincipled scoundrel, wholly unworthy of any respectable person's confidence; and after a minute or two of general conversation he rose to take his leave. He returned, however, from the drawing-room door. "I beg pardon, sincerely, Mrs. Akehurst, for troubling you with one more question: it is whether you could allow me to look for one moment at the counterpart lease, which I have no doubt is among your husband's papers? The fact is, a curious circumstance has occurred: as I was locking

at my own lease the other morning, to see the exact day on which the term ended, I was surprised to find that there was something missing. Not indeed that it's not long enough and to spare already, for the lawyers take good care of that with the deeds always; they like them to be of the old-fashioned sort, 'full measure and full prices,' as the publicans' placards say of their porter. Ha! ha! But I was going to say, Mrs. Akehurst, there is some curious mistake in my copy; I think it must be a whole portion of the deed missing; the words as they stand are evidently nonsense; and the sheet, or 'skin,' as they call it, after that which I suppose to be missing is quite about a different matter. I don't know that it is of any consequence, especially as the lease is nearly done with, still the omission occurs in my covenants; and if it were not troubling you too much, I thought it might be just as well to examine how this is. If you could allow me to look for one moment at your late husband's counterpart, which ought to be an exact copy of mine, I could see at once whether there has been any mistake."

"Certainly," replied Mrs. Akehurst; "I shall be very happy; I was just going to Mr. Akehurst's room of business, and the box of the Cheveleigh Court papers stands, I know, on one of the shelves.

I have never opened it ; but no doubt the deed you wish to see will be inside among them. Perhaps you will come with me, Mr. Cowdery."

The farmer accordingly followed Mrs. Akehurst into the study we have already mentioned, where her husband had usually transacted business. The box, with "Cheveleigh Court" painted in white letters on the outside, was handed down by Cowdery, and the key readily found ; but it was unnecessary. The box, which was covered with dust, and had evidently been undisturbed for some time, had never been locked, and it was now wholly empty. After a slight further search, which proved unsuccessful, the farmer, apologising for the trouble he had given, took his leave. Mrs. Akehurst pursued the search for a minute or two after his departure, but without encountering anything which appeared to relate to Cheveleigh. There were several boxes and other receptacles of papers, however, besides those which she had opened, and even these she had only looked at cursorily, without disturbing their contents. Concluding, therefore, that the Cheveleigh papers had accidentally got placed with these, and the matter appearing of little consequence, she sat down to the accounts which had been the object of her coming to the room, and the circumstance was soon forgotten by

her amidst the events which we shall detail in the present and following chapter.

When Cowdery left the house, he at first took some steps in the direction homewards. He was a stout walker, however, and, being anxious to see Butler on the subject of the proposed drainage, he decided on going to W —, which Cowdery seldom visited, there being another market-town of the same size nearer to his own house. The reasons which had led Charles to adopt that route through the fields which had proved so disastrous to him induced Cowdery to pursue the same path also; and he it was accordingly (as the reader may perhaps have anticipated) who arrived at the bridge shortly after Charles's accident. We left him following the course of the swollen brook, in the hope that the person who had fallen from the bridge might have been caught in some of the brakes which had already intercepted the hat. The chance seemed a poor one; but the farmer's interest was strongly excited, and he walked with a quick step, keeping at the same time a watchful eye on the banks on each side. He had pursued the stream round the bend we have already described below the bridge, and now approached the place where Charles had been landed.

The accident to Charles had not been so fatal as

the unintentional author of it had supposed. The latter had scarcely disappeared across the bridge, before Charles raised his head slowly and languidly, and gazed around him with a wild stare. His head, however, sunk again ; and when the farmer reached the spot, he found him stretched on the ground helpless and insensible, although evidently still alive. Cowdery's astonishment and dismay were extreme. The reason of Charles's fall from the bridge (for this was obviously what had occurred) was mysterious, and still more so his present position. There was no time, however, to waste upon inquiry now ; Charles's state required instant attention, and the farmer, raising him gently in his arms, carried him, not without difficulty,—for the poor lad lay, still fainting, a dead weight upon his supporter,—to the nearest farm house. This was at no great distance from the Court, and, as the faintness seemed decreasing, Cowdery decided on taking him home, a farm servant being despatched to W — for medical aid, and Cowdery himself going on before to prepare the family for this fresh disaster.

Great indeed was the consternation and grief at Cheveleigh when Charles was brought in, carried in a kind of extempore litter, between four farm labourers. He was now perfectly sensible, and able

to speak, and Mrs. Akehurst commenced a torrent of questions and exclamations. To the former Charles briefly responded: "He had fallen," he said, "from the bridge, the rail of which had given way. He did not remember touching the water, or anything that occurred from that time until he reached the farm house, excepting for one minute, when he woke up and found himself on a kind of bank, close to the stream." Charles took no notice of the altercation between himself and the other lad, and as he evidently disliked being questioned, and Lucy came to his rescue, entreating that he might at once go to bed without more talking, the subject was allowed to drop. It was well that she did so; Charles had hardly been laid in bed, and the surgeon from W—— had just given orders for the strictest quiet, when a sudden change passed over the lad's features. A burning pain in the head and violent sickness followed, and were succeeded by delirium and symptoms of brain fever. The surgeon, who had been informed of the circumstances as far as they were known, shook his head; there was some injury, he feared, beyond that caused by the mere immersion in the water. It was some time before the patient's state would allow of examination, but the mischief then appeared; in falling, Charles had evidently

struck his head either against the broken rail, or one of the supports of the bridge. He had been stunned by the blow, and the skull was slightly injured; the motion in removing him home had increased this, and the present symptoms were probably the result of the pressure of the broken bone upon the brain.

We must not, however, treat our readers to a surgical disquisition. By an operation skilfully performed, the immediate cause of danger was removed, and Charles's recovery became possible. He struggled for some days with the fever, but the boy's vigorous constitution prevailed, and at the end of a week he was out of danger. There was still, however, a sort of mental confusion noticeable about him, which hardly boded well: although, for the present, he was so weak from the fever that it was impossible to tell to what cause to refer it. He was a prisoner to his room for a month or two, during which time he had a most assiduous nurse in Lucy, while Mrs. Akehurst paid the sick room a visit twice a day, with a large amount of talking, and a display of maternal attentions, which made Lucy almost tremble when she heard her step. Mrs. Akehurst more than once pressed Charles on the subject of his accident, but he added nothing to his former account, and the occurrence still remained

mysterious. Those who speculated upon it, surmised that Charles had been carried by the back-water to the natural landing place we have described, and had either unconsciously struggled up the slope, or been left there when the water receded; the stream, as we have already mentioned, having subsided rapidly from the higher level it had at first attained. There were considerable difficulties in this explanation, but it stood its ground from no more likely one being started. Had Cowdery, indeed, examined the spot at the time, he would probably have found the clue, but he was absorbed in providing for Charles's safety, and the rain, which returned with violence the same evening, soon obliterated the few traces of footmarks which had been left in the grass or soft mud. Ultimately, the medico, guided by a judicious hint from Lucy, insisted positively on his patient not being subjected to inquiries so likely to cause him agitation and disturbance of mind, and the topic, having little interest for those who were not immediately concerned in it, gradually died away and was forgotten.

CHAP. IV.

"The living waste the dead men's gear."

THEOCR. *Idyll*. 16, 59.

WE must now allow our history to pass over an interval of some few months. Spring had given place to summer, and the latter was approaching its termination, although, far from conforming to the almanack, the sun of September shone with a heat and brilliancy far exceeding that of June. Charles's recovery had been slowly progressing; he was now able to be about the house as usual, and had even gone for a morning's shooting. There was still, however, the sort of mental suffering about him which we have noticed in our last chapter; a kind of unwillingness, perhaps inability, to fix his mind on any subject, and a weary way of talking, often ending in the middle of a sentence, as if the thread was broken which would enable him to pursue it to the end, and the exertion of recalling it was beyond his power.

He was singularly languid too, in frame, and easily tired, and there was still at times a throbbing pain in the part of the head where the injury had taken place, which, although the latter appeared completely healed, continued to make his state one of some anxiety to Lucy; her mother saw only the improvement, and insisted on treating Charles as convalescent. His entrance at Eton had of course been postponed, and at the recommendation of the medical men he was allowed to occupy himself as he pleased, taking an occasional lesson from Dr. Davis when he felt equal to it. Charles's pursuits had, however, much changed. It was almost piteous to see the handsome, spirited boy, who had entered keenly into every field-sport and out-door amusement, now stretched for hours on the sofa, not confined by any specific ailment, but from a feeling of weary listlessness, which seemed to crave for nothing but to be left at rest. To be sure, had it not been for her anxiety and grief on his own account, Lucy could hardly have wished Charles's state otherwise; for in the change which had come over him, there was nothing more remarkable than the fondness with which he now clung to his sister's society; at times this would be almost a superstition, as if her presence in the room operated as a charm, which could not be

removed without a vague feeling of pain and apprehension. Often he would be reading on the couch in the drawing-room;—he had come to love poetry now; it was Lucy's favourite study;—his long dark hair clustering over the pallid face, and his eyes apparently riveted on the book. But when he came to the bottom of the page, he would forget to turn it, and then his gaze would wander away to Lucy, as she sat working at her low table in the bay window, and there continue fixed until some movement of hers, or the entrance of other persons, diverted it, when his eye would again seek the book, only again to go through the same process. The impetuosity of his disposition was also now much abated; in Lucy's charge, at least, he had always, even through his illness, been uniformly patient and gentle, and now, in returning health, he seemed incapable of chafing or feeling irritable whenever she was near him. He would join her occasionally in a summer ramble too, and at such times seem more himself; although now, instead of vaulting gates and leaping ditches, he would rather follow where she led, and seemed to feel happiest when her beaming eye and bright laugh showed that she was enjoying the freedom of out-door exercise again, after the monotony and confinement of the sick room. So that Lucy, although she had

in a sense lost one brother,—the high-spirited lad, whose proficiency in manly sports she loved to hear praised, as much as if she could have joined in them herself,—had yet gained another in his place, in the docile, almost thoughtful, patient and companion, whose suffering was at times, she feared, more than others knew, and who at any rate clung to her more nearly than to any one else in the world for affection and sympathy. His tenderness to her was almost womanly; and she in return lent him the strong arm, never needed until sickness came, of her health and bright youth: and though often sad and depressed, almost to tears, at his evident want of power both in mind and body, yet never allowed him to share her dejection, or lack the smile or cheerful tone which seemed to re-animate him as if by magic.

During the summer months the party at Cheveleigh had continued with little change. Charles's illness, and her still recent loss, prevented Mrs. Akehurst from seeing much society, and she had, besides, plenty of occupation in superintending the progress of Mr. Bilderbit's erections and constructions for the artificial cascades. The rebuilding of Cheveleigh Court, although by no means given up, was postponed until the following year; partly, because Mrs. Akehurst would then be absent for the

London season, and partly, because she proposed, if Charles's convalescence continued, to assemble a large party at Cheveleigh during the autumn months, and the works could not, of course, be commenced until after their departure. To this must be added the pressure upon her income, which Mrs. Akehurst began to experience, as well from her greatly increased establishment at Cheveleigh and lavish private expenditure, as from the prodigious outlay upon the new water-works; so that it was evidently a matter of prudence that the house should not be commenced simultaneously with the latter.

At the period when the present chapter opens, Cheveleigh had received almost the full complement of its expected guests, and Mrs. Akehurst was in a high state of satisfaction. The dulness of the early part of the year had sat heavily upon her, and she had anxiously looked forward to the time when she might, without censure,—excepting, perhaps, by the very precise and old-fashioned,—throw her doors open to the reception of visitors at home, although still declining, for the present, to enter into general society elsewhere. The guests were accordingly numerous, and their characters various in proportion. The least interesting to Mrs. Akehurst herself were a sprinkling of “city people” from the metropolis.

Her father had been in business in London, and failed. Large and liberal was the support given him, and many were the friends, scarcely known as such in prosperous times, who, when poverty and subsequent ill-health overtook him, came forward with the hearty and substantial sympathy of the British trader,—that name which, we trust, may long maintain its honourable distinction from its Yankee travesty,—and brought to the shabby and meagrely-furnished home of the bankrupt many of the comforts which, now sorely needed, had been almost unnoticed in his own luxurious mansion. Mrs. Akehurst's friends and acquaintances in early life had accordingly lain almost exclusively eastward in London, and when, in later years, her marriage again raised her to affluence, she had not felt it creditable altogether to throw aside the benefactors of her former circumstances, and they were accordingly, from time to time, invited both to Cheveleigh, and also to Mrs. Akehurst's more distinguished *réunions* in Portman Square. Plain, homely, long-headed, right-hearted folk they were; but we must not weary the reader with their description, for honest worth and simple goodness soon pall upon the ear in this bad world. He must depict them to himself, wandering, rather vacantly, about the hand-

some saloons and costly *parterres* of Cheveleigh, not quite at home, either with the ormolu or the damask; the French dishes on the dinner-table, or the magnificent volumes of illustration in the drawing-room; the sportsmen's technicalities, or the ladies' gossip; the fair glades and stately plantations of the home park, or Mr. Bilderbit's elaborate inventions for spoiling them; and yet men of intelligence and refinement in their own way, notwithstanding.

Greatly more to their hostess's taste were the selection from her own particular friends in town, notables and fashionables from the west, who had been induced to compliment Cheveleigh with their presence. Mrs. Akehurst moved, of course, in excellent society, during the annual London residence of the family,—not, indeed, in that very innermost circle, the *real* aristocracy of fashion, into which wealth or rank are no passport, while its doors are open to receive intellect, especially conversational power, whoever may be its possessor;—but still, society of undoubted position, in which Mrs. Akehurst contrived to move by the aid of a tolerably lady-like deportment, and still more by her husband's family connections and fortune, without being unbearably reminded that her extrac-

tion lay without its barriers. Nothing, indeed, of the grace and refinement to which the upper circles in English society may at least lay claim attached to Mrs. Akehurst, nor had she any acquaintances on more intimate terms than the routine of ordinary visiting among those to whom this charm (no inconsiderable one) of the privileged class is really due. The scintillations of wit, the creations of poetry and art, the spell of female beauty, above all, that nameless elegance, symbolised in the low utterance, the light step and easy frankness of the best society, which interpenetrates its every movement, making it in its stillness and brightness like the fairy land of a summer day's dream,—these were all matters of which Mrs. Akehurst could not even have divined the meaning; her nature was too coarse and common to offer them the least sympathy, and, naturally, their possessors eschewed her presence as much as politeness would allow. But among those equally exoteric with herself she had numerous admirers and followers; her splendid receptions and excellent dinners, as a matter of course, secured her this. These accordingly now formed the staple of the visitors at Cheveleigh; hangers-on to opulent vulgarity, dwellers in the outskirts of high life, struggling grafts upon the trunk of greatness from

the next-door-round-corners of fashion, and the small houses jammed into the interstices of distinguished squares ; diners-out, lions, notorieties among the men ; gossip and scandal-mongers, envious dowagers, faded toasts among the women ; all the small fry of society, who are at once its pest and discredit, swarming at its doors, where they are just tolerated, and exhibiting their own faults and follies to those who have not the *entrée* there, as a faithful reflection of what goes on within. Such was Mrs. Hebsworth, a migration from Russell Square, where she had a capital house, to Bryanston Square, where she tenanted a band-box ; with her two nieces from India, Mathilde Vivian, who composed in German and moulded statuary, a tall sallow girl, with a long neck, by no means swan-like, and who usually sat on a chair at right angles to the company in disdainful silence ; and Betsy Powles, short and stout, with cheeks like a peony, and coils of rank hair, who would plant herself opposite a knot of gentlemen, and talk in a loud voice of the Derby and the new ballet. Such, too, were Mr. Spooner and Lady Kettleby, his wife ; the former a harmless character enough, but who had committed one capital fault in life by espousing a Baronet's widow ; being, in fact, accepted after a solemn consultation between that illustrious personage

and her most eminent female advisers, as to whether (the retention of her title on marriage being merely by courtesy) she would not forfeit precedence of a certain Knight's lady, the wife of a drysalter and *ci-devant* Mayor of London, who had hitherto followed her down to dinner meekly enough. Then there was Mrs. Templeman, connected with the peerage, although (as the envious suggested) with small credit to the female ancestor who formed the link, but as proud as Lucifer notwithstanding, and with a contempt for the untitled vulgar which exhibited itself in a general frostiness of demeanour, and an especial repugnance to the sordid practice of settling tradesmen's bills until obliged. Then there were the representatives of literature and art—(for Mrs. Akehurst patronised both after her own fashion; she cultivated bound poetry; bought pictures, in which she was generally imposed upon; secured the attendance of a real celebrity now and then at her grand parties, and acquiesced in smaller names for ordinary occasions)—hairy artists; solemn men of science, with long bald heads and immense appetites; German authors, austere as Brahmins in their parsimony of soap and water; professed musicians eternally wrangling (as if the science of harmony required some vent in an opposite direction); and amateurs,

mostly poor connections and dependents, shrinking, timid girls, who were set down to the piano of an evening in a tone which had at least as much command in it as entreaty, and there executed (until relieved) what *might have been* a cat's dance in walnut-shells over the keys, for all the company knew to the contrary; the commencement of a brilliant fantasia being usually, in England, the signal of an increased vociferation from all the knots of talkers in the room.

A sprinkling of these minor stars now enlightened the Cheveleigh hemisphere. Their names (excepting the Germans) were mostly monosyllabic; and the mind laboured under perpetual apprehensions of error as to whether Mr. Batt (whose landscapes were marvels of genius, but were always rejected at the Exhibition through the shameful jealousy of the Academicians) was the cadaverous-looking man in the blue coat and brass buttons, or whether this was Mr. Blubb, whose poem, in nine cantos, was the best thing since Childe Harold. But the person on whom Mrs. Akehurst decidedly looked with the most favour was a certain Polish Count, who was almost the newest addition to her menagerie. Count Snoboletsky did little to amuse the company, but he paid assiduous attention to his fair entertainer. His face

was a monstrous combination of bristle and pustules, his hair shaggy and unctuous; he smelt perpetually of stale smoke, and swore (to be sure it was in some unknown language) like an expectoration; but apparently something in his personal charms, or the wrongs of Poland, enlisted Mrs. Akehurst's sympathies in his favour. Accordingly, the Count was now her right-hand man on all occasions, executing commissions, handing her to her carriage, adjusting her stirrup in riding parties with chivalrous gallantry; in short, playing the male toady in all its varieties. His attentions were not likely to be dangerous to Mrs. Akehurst's peace of mind, but they were agreeable to her and flattered her vanity; while the Count probably thought that a month's good living at Cheveleigh was no bad equivalent for a routine of servility and grimace.

Some friends of John Akehurst there were among the company, and these formed its redeeming features. Mrs. Akehurst had invited, indeed, several guests from the county families, with whom her husband had always lived on the best of terms, but she did not succeed in mustering many of these; some thought the gathering rather a premature return to gaiety; others knew the woman, and disliked her sufficiently to discover excellent excuses for declin-

ing; and, on the whole, this class sent but a small contingent, principally comprising the *parvenus* of the county, who readily caught at any chance of a reception on an equal footing with its autochthones. The last additions to the list were some half-dozen sporting friends of Mr. Akehurst's; capital fellows, who had come down for the September shooting; and a certain guardsman, a nephew of Mrs. Templeman's, whose motives for coming anywhere, or doing any one thing, at any given time rather than another, appeared to be a problem which Nature had not precisely given him the faculties to solve.

The party now mustered was accordingly a pretty numerous one, and the accommodations and resources of Cheveleigh, ample as they were, were tested to the utmost. The weather, as we have said, had been superb, and still continued so: *fêtes*, picnics, rides, drives, succeeded each other without intermission; the bustle and excitement were endless, and Mrs. Akehurst enjoyed herself thoroughly. The only drawback to her satisfaction was the constantly increasing expense in which, as we have intimated, she was now involved. One of the few good impressions which her husband, aided partly by early education, had been able to stamp upon her character,

was a strict punctuality in the settlement of tradesmen's bills, large and small. She had come, in fact, from long habit, to attach a feeling of discredit to leaving any account unsettled beyond the proper time for its payment, her husband's liberal allowance for the London and country establishments making this a matter of no difficulty, as far as these were concerned; while for her private expenses, although always in excess of her income, Mrs. Akehurst had never adopted the practice of leaving the bills unpaid; the excess was always avowed, and so long as it kept within some limits, was discharged by her husband without much comment. Since his death she had mechanically continued the same practice up to the present time; and the result was, that having no longer any restraint upon the extravagance of her expenditure, she began now to be seriously straitened for ready money. Whether, like Frederick Akehurst, she had in her private thoughts anticipated that her husband's large property would not be left wholly at her own disposal, may be uncertain; at any rate, when this proved to be the case, the wealth, of which she was now sole mistress, seemed to her inexhaustible. As we have stated in a previous chapter, no caprice or fancy, however frivolous or costly, remained ungratified; and her profusion

had now consequently brought her to a point at which, if she was still to continue paying ready money, some additional present supplies became indispensable. The last half-year's rents had been swallowed up almost before they became due, to supply pressing demands. Mr. Akehurst's funded property had also, from time to time, been sold, and the last two or three thousands had been received in the summer just passed, and had already disappeared. Frightful bills, too, the necessary results of the numerous guests and reckless outlay of the present festivities, kept pouring in every week; the tradesmen who sent them would, on the slightest intimation, have postponed doing so, but this would have been a departure from the invariable Cheveleigh rule, and Mrs. Akehurst shrunk from it, from a feeling which, as we have said, had become almost instinctive with her, of a loss of position and credit in so doing; and the present time, especially, was one in which it would never do to set afloat any rumours as to the existence of pecuniary difficulties, which might have been the possible result. These demands, accordingly, must be forthwith met; in addition to which, the water-works were rapidly approaching their completion, and the contractors had already become entitled to the sum which was payable on their

attaining a certain stage. As to any reduction in her expenses, that could not be thought of at present, even had Mrs. Akehurst been disposed to it. The company would remain at Cheveleigh at least for some weeks longer, and the first performance of the cascades, when completed, was to be ushered in with a *fête* which had been talked of for weeks past, and was intended to be on a scale of the utmost magnificence. Under these circumstances, it became imperative on Mrs. Akehurst to do something. She pondered over matters for a whole forenoon, and then sent for Mr. Butler. Unconsciously to herself, she had now passed the Rubicon indeed !

Butler, as we have already mentioned, was a solicitor, and had a good business, but hitherto he had been employed by Mrs. Akehurst only as her agent in collecting the rents, and in the general management of her property. It had long been his ambition, both for the immediate profit, and from observing the more prospective advantages which would result from such a connection, to become intrusted with the conduct of some of the more general branches of his patroness's affairs ; and his satisfaction was proportionately great, when Mrs. Akehurst, after various preliminary lamentations, from which her hearer might have inferred that she was one of the

most unfortunate and ill-used women alive, approached the real subject of the conference. Butler was a close observer, and, from one or two hints which he had previously collected, was not without a suspicion that Mrs. Akehurst was beginning to feel embarrassed in money matters; and in the hope of her resorting to him in this emergency, as she had actually done, he had postponed the investment of various trust funds which happened to be in his hands at the time, and had also made up his mind as to the most eligible mode of raising any additional amount which might be required. It was with an air of respectful sympathy, that Butler listened to the announcement of his client's difficulties; he did not at first, however, readily admit the necessity for his interference. "The last rents," he said, "amounted to a very large sum; was Mrs. Akehurst sure she was not under some mistake? Had she had her banker's book? probably she might have added it up wrong. No? But there was Mr. Akehurst's large personal property; he had not, of course, presumed to inquire, but he had heard that the amount in the funds was very considerable; Mrs. Akehurst was aware, of course, that there would be no difficulty in at once selling out; it required nothing but a letter to a broker; but if Mrs. Akehurst wished,

he would arrange it for her with the utmost pleasure. Or, perhaps, there might be some other securities which she would prefer to realise?" Having, by this exhaustive process, ascertained the real position of affairs, Butler assumed a gay and cheerful tone; he quite-pooch-pooched (of course respectfully enough in manner) the whole difficulty. "There was not the smallest occasion for Mrs. Akehurst to make herself uneasy; the money would be forthcoming at once; he would himself be able to furnish a considerable part of the funds, quite as much, at any rate, as would be required to meet the present demands; no mortgage would be necessary; with Mrs. Akehurst's magnificent income, the loan would, of course, only be required as a temporary thing, and he should be perfectly satisfied with her note of hand. It was very liberal, very noble of Mrs. Akehurst to settle all her bills with so much promptitude; few persons in her position would have done the same; still, Mr. Butler could not deny that it was much the most really satisfactory course for all parties, and he had always, in his humble sphere, adopted the same rule himself. As regarded any sums that might be required for future expenses, if Mrs. Akehurst would do him the favour to let him know when they were likely to be needed, he had no

doubt he should be able to arrange for the advance with some friends in town, and, probably, upon the same terms. At any rate, it was quite certain that the owner of such a magnificent domain as Cheveleigh might command money whenever she thought fit, and to any amount; the Bank of England could hardly be a better security." This conversation had taken place about the middle of August; Butler had kept his word, and Mrs. Akehurst's simple execution of a promissory note had at once relieved her from the difficulties with which she had then been beset. The offer made by Butler of negotiating a further loan for her, had also been eagerly caught at by Mrs. Akehurst, who found this a very convenient and straightforward mode of supplying the lavish expenditure which the hospitalities of Cheveleigh and the approaching *fête* of necessity required.

As ready money was needed, accordingly, Butler was instructed to procure it. This was easily done through the agency of the person whom Butler had referred to under the plural description of "his friends in London;" *videlicet*, one Solomon Isaacs, a Jew Doctor as well as a money-lender and bill-discounter on an extensive scale; quite as great a rascal as the attorney himself, and one whom the latter had found might be safely trusted as a confederate

in the numerous transactions of more than questionable honesty which they had already shared together. Solomon Isaacs proved to be entirely of a liberal turn as far as the security was concerned; he was as well content as Butler had been to accept Mrs. Akehurst's note of hand, but he did not limit himself to the moderate rate of interest which the latter had thought it advisable to accept for his own advances, and Mrs. Akehurst's bills were accordingly discounted at twelve or fifteen per cent. This, however, gave her little trouble at present. Meanwhile, as one consequence of the negotiations we have described, it followed that Butler began to be constantly at Cheveleigh on business. As by degrees he felt himself more secure, he gradually dropped some of his reserve, although he still retained a respectful, almost a cringing, demeanour and address towards his client. Upon the latter, Butler's character began to exercise a very unfavourable influence, almost amounting, from his bold recklessness in evil, his entire coolness and self-possession on all occasions, and his singular knowledge of character and power of adapting himself to its several phases, to a kind of fascination. But of this we may have to speak at a more fitting opportunity.

Where was Lucy, meanwhile, during the proceed-

ings we have been describing in this chapter? From the inner world of Cheveleigh, the business consultations and now almost daily conferences between her mother and the attorney, she was of course excluded; from the incessant round of gaiety and festivity she endeavoured as much as possible to exclude herself. Not that Lucy was of an ungenial temper, or that she would not under other circumstances have found both pleasure in the society of her father's old friends, and amusement in watching some of the more grotesque guests who appeared at Cheveleigh as the representatives of her mother's London circle. But Lucy had no heart for this now; the whole thing jarred upon her still recent grief, which her affectionate nature retained the longer, from the absence of sympathy and communication; and even without this, she felt too uneasy about Charles to allow of her entering with zest into the amusements and diversions of which every day now presented some new variety. She would love far better to escape from the buzz of voices and confused occupation which pervaded the saloons, into her brother's quiet sitting-room, a small octagonal chamber in one of the picturesque turrets which had excited Mr. Bilderbit's animadversions; and there either cheer him, if dull, with some

pleasant talk of old times, or anecdotes of the party down-stairs, or, if he seemed drowsy, read him off to sleep with the tones of her low musical voice, and then sit watching till the eyelids were lifted again, and the young life returned from the freer land of dreams to its weary plodding course in the debilitated frame. For Charles, without any apparent access of illness, was now somehow much feebler; feebler from day to day; he rarely felt equal to meeting the busy scene down-stairs; when he did, it was seldom to move from the sofa, where he lay hardly noticed by the majority of the guests, but often causing a compassionate glance to be directed towards his couch by those who remembered old times at Cheveleigh, and thought of the grief his father would have felt in watching the pallid features and dejected air of the boy he had dearly loved. But usually Charles now occupied the octagon room we have spoken of. His books and the miscellanea of his field sports had been brought up there at his request; and Lucy had insisted on arranging in a respectable state of order the various guns, fishing-tackle, bows and arrows, spurs, whips, collars, and other valuables which had at first lain about the room in hopeless confusion. The little sitting-room had only one fault; the bay window, though large, and overlooking the principal

entrance of the house, with a beautiful park vista beyond, was rather high from the floor, and where Charles usually sat he was unable to see out of it. But Lucy's presence generally compensated for this; she would place her chair on the deep raised step, which, as is usual in old houses, ran round the inside of the window, and there, like Rebecca in the attack on Front de Bœuf's castle, although with a far different scene before her, act as a medium of communication between the outer world and the invalid who was debarred from its enjoyment. Charles did not, indeed, appear to care so much for her actual report of things outside; his waning interest in what went on round him—always one of the least hopeful symptoms in his presumed convalescence—would not allow of this. He seemed satisfied if Lucy was cognisant of and shared the sensations of the external world; if *her* eyes met the golden sunshine, the sailing clouds, the birds on the wing, the stirring leaves, the riders gathering at the hall-door, the sportsmen coming home with their laden game-bags; all the warm colouring and kaleidoscope motion of actual life:—when summoned to the window he would say, "Oh, no, you see it for me, Lucy!" And so, in this way of vicarious communication, as it were, with exterior objects, Charles gradually deepened the

isolation of his hermit life, passing more and more out of himself, and seeming to live in the existence of the fair young being beside him.

These were happy hours indeed for Lucy, but she was not always allowed to enjoy them unmolested; she would occasionally be summoned from Charles's room to join, with an aching heart enough, the excursion or drive, which always seemed so long and so unspeakably tedious; as if there were something in the Druidical stones, the Roman camp, or Lady Charteris's artificial ruins, which stimulated the Cheveleigh *savans* and curiosity-seekers into a more than ordinary expenditure of dulness. At meal-times, too, Lucy was never spared; it was as much as she could do to beg off Charles's attendance there; while it occasionally happened that Charles himself, who had come to exhibit almost a lover's thought and solicitude for his sister, insisted on her leaving his room, and taking some ride or walk which might call back the roses to her cheek again. Hence, Lucy was oftener in the fashionable and distinguished circles down-stairs than she much cared to be; and many a scene, half comical and half vexatious, she encountered in consequence. We will sketch one of these for the reader's edification, in a fresh chapter.

CHAP. V.

"But they who met, I cannot tell if all shall meet again,
What penury and grief may do, what shame and chill disdain."

WINTERSGILL.

It is a hot September afternoon, although within a few days only of the close of the month. Luncheon has been concluded about half-an-hour, and the various groups of idlers have repaired to the drawing-room, the bidders to consider how to bestow their tediousness for the next four hours, and the bored to anticipate the necessity of endurance for the same period. The sportsmen, who are the principal life of the party, with three or four others of its most serviceable constituents, who have been induced to join them for the day's shooting, are not of course expected home till dusk. The knots of unemployed, however, lounging by the open window—for the very loveliness of the day is often urged as a reason for not going out to enjoy it—or dispersed round ottomans or on the backs of chairs,

are numerous and tolerably conversable. Let us assume the privilege of circulating round, and collecting a few crumbs.

"You seem to be enjoying some excellent jest, there, young ladies," observed Sir Andrew Milward; advancing to an ottoman, on which Miss Betsy Powles had thrown herself back in convulsions of laughter, while her cousin, Mathilde Vivian, preserved her usual posture of dignified indifference (rather intensified at the present moment), on an angle of the same seat. Sir Andrew was a courteous but rather solemn old gentleman from the north of the county, who had arrived the day before with his son, Captain Milward; the latter had joined the shooting-party.

"Oh, it's such fun, Sir Andrew," answered Miss Betsy, with a voice and laugh which made the Baronet shudder; "here's Mathilde so frightened at a wasp, but she was too proud to own it, and she's been sitting on the corner there, never condescending to turn her head round to see where it was, but hearing it buzz, buzz, every now and then, close to her ear, and looking like a stuck pig. Why the wasps are nothing to the mosquitos we used to have in India; do you remember our going to bed one night, Mathilde, and you'd left a place open in the top of

the curtain? The mosquitos came in, and stung you all night like a good 'un; they hardly touched me; I suppose my hide's too tough."

"Nonsense, I tell you it's no such thing; Gutch is a fool for saying so" (this compliment to the understanding of the absent Gutch proceeded from a group of musicians near the vacant fire-place, as usual, in hot discussion); "Hornby never borrowed the air from Smith's piece; and even if he did, Smith's piece is not original."

"How do you make that out?"

"Why there are four bars together in the andante movement exactly the same, note for note, as the Zauberflotte; and the finale is just like one of Rossini's."

"Oh! if you go on at that rate, you will make out that no music is original at all."

"Well, I don't believe it is, much of it. 'The Heavens are telling,' for instance, in Haydn's Creation, is identically the same tune as an old song, 'The Lass of Richmond Hill;' did you never hear Bishop say so?"

"Do you draw, Miss Akelhurst?" asked a bashful and rather insipid-looking young gentleman, a son of Lady Kettleby's by her first marriage, approaching one of the side tables, where Lucy was seated with

one of the "poor relations," whom she was kindly endeavouring to interest in a magnificent volume of Swiss engravings.

"Very little," replied Lucy; "but I am fond of sketching, and if you are an artist, you will find so many subjects in the park and village which I am sure would repay you."

The bashful man had received his answer, and, not being prepared on the spur of the moment, was meditating in silence a second experiment at conversation, — possibly the celebrated interrogation of "Do you swim, Ma'am?" when the sprightly George Miles, a talker of maximum fluency upon a minimum supply of brains, strolled up to the group.

"Ah, Miss Akehurst, good morning; I don't think I have had the pleasure of seeing you to-day before; you keep sadly in the background. What superb engravings; you know Switzerland, of course? No, really? oh, you ought to go there, you can do it as easily as possible now. Last Cambridge 'long,' Walworth and I went there with our knapsacks, and on into Italy; such a splendid trip; we went by Paris, and down the Saône from Chalons to Lyons; then up to Geneva (saw the Perte du Rhone by the way); then to Sallanches, Chamounix, Martigny; then by Villeneuve, Chillon, and the Simmenthal, to

Thun and Interlaken ; jolly place ; had such lots of fun there ; afterwards we did the Grimsel and the Strahleck—no, it was 'nt the Strahleck, it was the Furca, down to some place, and across the St. Gothard ; Bellinzona, Lago Maggiore, and all that, down to Milan ;—Oh, but I forgot, you 've never seen all these places ; well, you must go there next summer. We were only eight weeks out, and we got down to Venice and Rome, and back by Genoa ; it's such a glorious thing to have to talk about when one gets home."

"You have been very gay this season, Mr. Anstruther?" This was Mrs. Templeman's nephew, the gentleman already mentioned; the speaker was Mrs. Hinchworth. One of the city ladies, who had not yet got so far west even as Russell Square, stood at a respectful distance, open-eared.

"Ah, no," the Honourable Mr. Anstruther spoke with great deliberation, and with something between a drawl and a lisp now made familiar to society by Her Majesty's illustrious deliberations; "it was vewy dull, you see."

"I understand there were some capital Woolwich balls this year."

"Ah! perhaps; I don't very often go there; I was at one there, you know April."

"Oh really," pursued the indefatigable aspirant after fashion; "I think I must have been at the same. I enjoyed it exceedingly, Mr. Anstruther, and the balls there are always so select; one is sure of not meeting people there who are not the 'thing.' The only thing was, Mr. Anstruther, didn't you think the room was dreadfully dusty?"

"Aw dweadfully," replied the guardsman. "Why you see, the fact is, it's those awtillewy officers; they walk from their quawters to the ball-woom; and walking, they bring in with them a quantity of gwavel; which gwavel they gwind to gwit; which gwit becomes dust."

"I thought of buying some insertion, which would just make it do" (the voluble tones belonged to our friend, Mrs. Akehurst; she was seated on a low couch; Lady Emily Charteris, who had called for a morning visit, reclining at the other end, and Count Snoboletsky standing in front of his hostess, following the torrent of her discourse with sundry bows and grimaces, as if he had fully understood everytwo rd of it); "Mrs. Cadwell wanted me to take the whole piece; she said she was sure I should find it so becoming, it would just suit my style. But I told her I didn't think it worth while having it now, as I shall so soon be going out of deep mourning. And

how are George and Sophy? we shall be very glad to see them here whenever you like to bring them. I thought Sophy looking rather pale and thin the last time I saw her here; you have no fears of any complaint of the lungs with her, have you? I thought from her aunt having died of it" (we cannot resist breaking our promise in a former chapter, by inserting here a deep sigh), "that perhaps you might be apprehensive about her. Oh! Lucy"—

Lucy was on the point of making her escape up stairs, where she fancied Charles might want her; she returned, however, with a good grace, although with the prospect of one of those interminable discussions of nothings which made a visit from Lady Emily sit heavy on her spirit. Fortune, however, was propitious on the present occasion; the post had arrived, and the entrance of the footman with the letters, which were rather numerous, induced Lady Emily to rise for her departure. The slight impulse thus given, communicated itself to the rest of the company; Mrs. Akehurst retired to her private room, and the various groups of talkers and listeners having unanimously pronounced it impossible to stop longer in-doors on such a day, dispersed in various directions about the grounds. Lucy now

hastened up stairs with a fleet step, but Charles was asleep. Lucy had felt wearied during the day, both with an accession of anxiety upon Charles's account, who had seemed more languid than usual, and with the uninteresting conversation and characters which had engaged her attention, however unwillingly, during the last hour or two. She needed some antidote to her low spirits, and returning to the drawing-room, now, as she supposed, emptied of its late occupants, betook herself to her usual resort, the piano. Lucy did not play with first-rate execution as a performer, but she both played and sung with extreme natural taste and pathos; music to her was an *utterance*; a mode in which the passing emotions of the mind and heart within, sought expression and communicated themselves to the external world; and whether she played some favourite piece from memory, or prolonged on the keys the cadences of some wild melody of her own, the instrument in her hands literally *spoke*. She now sate before it, at first drawing from it a quivering and uncertain sound, as if fatigued and unequal to rallying her thoughts to any settled air; soon, however, some exquisite chords, lightly touched, suggested a modulation in unison with her own feelings, and a strain, joyous in its commencement, the fragment of some popular piece

of the day, but gradually assuming a plaintive character, and passing into variations of intense beauty and pathos, interrupted at times by a kind of refrain, expressive of sadness and foreboding, rose through the lofty saloons and corridors and filled the mind with a strange and melancholy dejection. Lucy had played for some time, the instrument responding to her touch almost like a familiar, when a singular species of *crowing* sound, in a remote corner of the room, forming a low running accompaniment to the music, made her perceive that she was not, as she supposed, alone. Lucy rose from the piano in haste, for she had a nervous dread of any one hearing her play at these times; it seemed like laying bare the innermost fibres of thought and feeling, a revelation to careless eyes of the mysterious sanctuary of self, into which no stranger had ever yet penetrated.

She had scarcely quitted her seat, however, before the unobserved listener interposed to prevent her purpose. It was Count Snoboletsky, who, in a fatal moment for himself, had taken the opportunity afforded by the general exit from the drawing-room, to ensconce himself at a Canterbury writing-table in a recess of one of the windows, for the purpose of replying to a letter, containing a pressing reference

to the subject of cash payments, which had just reached him by the afternoon's post. He was so engaged with his writing that he had not observed Lucy's entrance, while the deep draperies of the window had prevented his being seen himself. The Count, however, although a thorough impostor in all other respects, had a very genuine passion for music. For the first time almost since he had been in England, he heard a performance which showed the real power of genius, and the effect upon him was irresistible. At first he contented himself with following the wild but deeply beautiful air with sundry grimaces and bodily contortions; then he involuntarily commenced the low accompaniment we have mentioned, and finally, on Lucy's rising from the piano, he hurried across the room to her, overturning a work-table and one or two chairs on his way, and protesting with immense gesticulation, in bad French and worse English, that it was "an inspiration," that "Mademoiselle was a very angel." Finding that Lucy, who was at first startled and then irresistibly inclined to laugh at the grotesque figure before her, still continued standing, the Count in his enthusiasm flung himself on both knees, much in the attitude in which Man Friday makes his

profession of allegiance to Crusoe, and possessing himself, reverently enough, of the small white hand, which still rested on the instrument, endeavoured to express by a violent splutter of words, as well as by a variety of pantomime, that he laid his head under her feet, and that if she would only resume playing he should be her devoted and humble slave as long as he had the honour to occupy a place in the same universe with such a *grande artiste*. Now it happened, unfortunately, that at this precise moment one of the footmen entered to announce a visitor. He did not find Mrs. Akehurst, as he had expected to do; but he saw before him the scene we have just described, and not being familiar with the energetic fashion in which our continental neighbours express sometimes a very ordinary sentiment or request, man John was persuaded that he had become the witness to an actual declaration of love, and accordingly, on his return to the servants' hall, made a full and particular statement to that effect; adding, from the inspiration of his own genius, that he had seen the Count kiss Miss Akehurst's hand, and that in a voice trembling with rage she had commanded him to rise and quit the room directly. The story was retailed up-stairs at bed-time by Mrs. Akehurst's

French maid, losing nothing by the repetition; and the Count's fate was sealed. Mrs. Akehurst said nothing to Lucy, who, as soon as she could release her hand, ran up to Charles's octagon, slightly vexed at the absurd position in which the man had found the party, but principally disposed to laugh heartily at the evident consternation in his face, and the vehemence of the Pole's musical enthusiasm. But Mrs. Akehurst *thought* all the more; and although, as we have already intimated, she had run little danger of being betrayed into any youthful indiscretion by the Count's attentions, she had still been sufficiently flattered by them to resent deeply their transference to another object, especially to Lucy, of whose superiority in every quality of mind and person to herself Mrs. Akehurst had always nourished a stinging kind of jealousy. Accordingly, when Count Snoboletsky next presented himself to his hostess with his usual demonstrations of gallantry, he was unpleasantly surprised to find them received with cutting coolness, and, as Mrs. Akehurst had a surprising talent for making the house disagreeable to any one whose stay she did not desire, it was not forty-eight hours from his unfortunate exhibition of musical *furor*, before the Count had been driven to take his leave, and was on his

way back to the metropolis, where he had ample opportunities of contrasting the dingy service and ill-cooked fare of the "*table d'hôte à cinq heures*" of a Leicester Square hotel with the sumptuous dinners and elegant saloons of Cheveleigh.

CHAP. VI.

"It is a fearful thing when men fill high
The syphon cup of sweet prosperity ;
They sip and dally with the pleasant draught,
And make it wait *their* pleasure to be quaffed ;
Then comes the juggler, Destiny, and charms
An empty goblet in their clutching palms ;
Their hopes all blighted, and their cheek grown pale,
And madness in their soul— but to my tale."

WALLIS.

WE have mentioned in the last chapter that the footman who interrupted what he conceived to be Count Snoboletsky's declaration of love to Lucy, announced a visitor; this was Mr. Butler. On the present occasion, he came without having been sent for; it was on the subject of Mr. Cowdery's lease. The farmer, it seems, had called upon him, as requested by Mrs. Akehurst, on one or two previous occasions, but had found the agent not at home. This morning, however, he had been more successful; and as the lease was an important one, and the farmer was anxious to have the terms of the renewal

settled, Mr. Butler had thought it best to see Mrs. Akehurst without delay. A conference of some length took place, in which it was decided that it would be better not to attempt raising the Hawthornden rents. Butler was a sagacious man, although an unprincipled one; and having no personal interest to serve in the matter, he advised Mrs. Akehurst very soundly that the loss of a tenant like Cowdery would far more than counterbalance any advantage that might be gained from a possible increase of rent. The proposed drainage, no very expensive matter, was also acceded to by Mrs. Akehurst, although with some reluctance; and Butler had risen to take his leave, after promising that a large sum, which was required for indispensable purposes connected with the intended *fête* (which was to take place in little more than a fortnight), should be forthcoming without fail, when Mrs. Akehurst suddenly recollected her ineffectual search for the Cheveleigh papers, which she had forgotten in the course of subsequent events until reminded of it by Cowdery's present application. Butler shared his employer's surprise at these papers not being in the proper deed box, and recommended that a search should be instituted for them without delay. It was still early in the afternoon, and the present

time appeared to offer a favourable opportunity; Butler was requested to remain, and assist Mrs. Akehurst in the investigation, as his legal knowledge would enable him readily to discover the documents if misplaced. The study was now accordingly searched; every box, drawer, cupboard, ransacked and rummaged from top to bottom, and the contents of the numerous deeds and other papers which had accumulated in those receptacles, carefully examined by the attorney, but wholly without success. At last, when even the cloth hangings of the bookcases had been all lifted, in the hope that the missing deeds might have been placed underneath them, it became evident that what they sought for was not at Cheveleigh, at any rate. It was, however, suggested by Butler as probable that Mr. Akehurst might have had the papers in town on business, and finding it inconvenient to bring them down, deposited them with his solicitor; perhaps some mortgage transaction had taken place or been in contemplation. At any rate, it was desirable at once to make the inquiry.

A solicitor at W—— had been employed by Mr. Akehurst for general purposes, and afterwards by his widow, for the necessary business connected with his will; but, on the rough draft of an old lease, the

only document in any way affecting the Cheveleigh property which had been brought to light by the afternoon's search, appeared the name and address of an eminent London firm, Messrs. Neill and Hetherington, well known to Butler by reputation; Mrs. Akehurst was wholly unacquainted with the name. It was accordingly settled that the latter parties should be written to by the next day's post,—it was too late to save the mail that evening,—requesting that the title-deeds of Cheveleigh, if deposited in their custody, might be at once forwarded to Mrs. Akehurst. Butler also recommended that a similar application should be made to the solicitor in W——.

The latter inquiry proved unsuccessful. Mr. Strangways had never been employed, he stated, by the late Mr. Akehurst in any business relating to the Cheveleigh estates, and he was not at all aware in whose hands the papers connected with them had been placed. The only course, therefore, was to await the arrival of a letter from the London firm, which, happily, was received by return of post. As this epistle, although concise enough, is of considerable importance to our narrative, and as solicitors generally have the art of couching their meaning (when it is meant to be understood) in the tersest

and clearest language supplied by the vocabulary, we shall probably do our readers good service by giving it (with any future correspondence we may have the honour to receive from the same hands) *verbatim* :—

“Lincoln’s Inn Fields,

“Sept. 30th, 18—

“Dear Madam,

“We are in receipt of your favour of the 28th inst., and hasten to apprise you that the whole of the deeds and other papers relating to the Cheveleigh Court property are safe in our custody.

“We fear, indeed, that, as trustees of the settlement, we should not be justified in complying with your request to place them in your hands, and we regret, accordingly, that we are under the necessity of declining to do so.

“At the same time, we beg to assure you of the pleasure we shall have in rendering you every assistance in our power during your management of the estates, by forwarding you copies of any documents you may wish to inspect, or in any other way you may think fit to command our services.

“We have the honour to be,

“Dear Madam,

“Your obedient Servants,

“NEILL & HETHERINGTON.”

If Mr. Bilderbit's *jets d'eau* had suddenly commenced spouting fire and lava, it could hardly have occasioned more astonishment in Mrs. Akehurst's mind than she appeared to experience from the perusal of this laconic and extremely business-like epistle. She literally hung over it, open-mouthed; not, at first, with any defined feelings of apprehension or dismay, but in simple, uncontrollable wonder; turning the paper from side to side, when she had slightly recovered herself, as if it might contain some contradiction or explanation; she even looked at the address, as though the letter must have reached her by mistake, and been intended for a totally different person. Fortunately she was alone on receiving it, or her evident look of startled wonder must have given rise to remark and conjecture: she had, in fact, ordered the letters on that day to be taken in to Mr. Akehurst's study, out of the way of intruders. When the first surprise was slightly passed, she rang the bell violently, and requested that Mr. Butler might be immediately sent for, awaiting his arrival in the same room.

The interval of an hour or two elapsed before Butler's appearance, during which the utter incredulity which her correspondents' letter had at first awakened in Mrs. Akehurst's mind was succeeded by

a deadly, ague-like sensation, alternately sending a cold shudder through her frame, and quickening her veins into the glow of fever; she was incapable of steady thought, but felt restlessly impatient of doing something: over and over again she perused the note, trying to elicit some new information from its meagre contents; but all was surmise and mystery. "*The settlement;*" *what settlement?* what settlement could there, or ever had there been? it was inexplicable.

Mr. Butler, when he arrived, was no more able to furnish a solution of the problem than herself. He could only suggest the obvious course, but one which appeared interminably long for the gratification of Mrs. Akehurst's eager thirst to know more, of another letter to the London firm. This was despatched, not without considerable difficulty in getting Mrs. Akehurst to rally the calmness necessary for its composition. It expressed the utmost surprise at the intimation contained in Messieurs Neill and Hetherington's note, and requested that the writer might be apprised without delay of the nature of the settlement referred to. The reply was again received by return of post; and we give it, as before, *verbatim* :—

"Lincoln's Inn Fields,

"October 4th, 18—

"Dear Madam,

"We do not at all wonder at the surprise expressed in your letter of the 2nd instant (which duly reached us this morning) in reference to the settlement of the Cheveleigh Court property, of which it appears our previous letter contained the first intimation you have received. The settlement in question was executed several years since by the father of the late Mr. Akehurst; and we had no idea but that you were fully cognisant of the fact, as well as of the contents of the document. The settlement was prepared by ourselves, as the solicitors of Mr. Akehurst senior, and we have always continued to act for your late husband in the business connected with this property, although we were not employed by him in any other capacity.

"We regret exceedingly that you should have been so long kept in ignorance of your actual position in regard to the Cheveleigh estates, which we assure you should not have occurred, except from our assuming, as of course, that you were fully apprised of the circumstance. Probably, if we had acted more uniformly for your late husband, we should have ascertained that no communication had

been made to you on this subject; but we seldom saw him personally, and then only on matters strictly connected with the business of the property.

"We hasten to put you in possession of the contents of the settlement, as you desire, and have accordingly directed a copy to be made, which will be forwarded to you as a parcel at the earliest possible moment. Meanwhile, we trust that no serious inconvenience will have resulted from your misapprehension on this subject, as, for some years at least, your position under the settlement will differ little from that of actual ownership.

"We have the honour to be, &c.

"NEILL & HETHERINGTON."

And now we must request our readers' indulgence for a few moments, while we endeavour shortly, albeit not profoundly skilled in the mysteries of the law ourselves, to put before them such an explanation of the real position of things as regarded Cheveleigh, and the circumstances by which they had been brought about, as (although the main incidents of our story do not, in fact, hinge upon any such legal niceties) are still indispensable for its right comprehension. With which view, and in order that our book may not be at once discarded as unreadable (if

it has not met with that calamity already), we will, at the same time, endeavour to use such language in these matters as shall savour of the ordinary tongue of Her Majesty's lieges, and not of that which prevailleth within the fusty precincts of the Temple or Westminster Hall. The facts, then, kind reader, to which we will shortly call your attention, are as follows:—

The Cheveleigh estate was one of the oldest properties in the country, and still more distinguished by a circumstance of less usual occurrence than could be desired; it had descended for the best part of the two centuries immediately preceding the period of our tale, by a direct transmission from father to son, without wills, settlements, portions, mortgages, or other incumbrances, dealings, or transactions whatsoever. We say this was a desirable state of things, although, perhaps, that type of respectability, the family solicitor, might not agree with us; for this direct course of descent diverted from its natural and orthodox destination many a six and eight-pence which would otherwise have concurred in promoting the great national object of maintaining, in full vigour and efficiency, those gentlemen of the law who appear to be considered, like the oaks in its winding glades, the boast and appanage of every

landed proprietor's estate. At any rate, the Akehursts were very proud of their far-descended home and the unencumbered rent-roll which resulted from this state of things; and it had become a family maxim, retained in all its tenacity by successive generations, that the usual theory,—we believe it has been called “a magnificent creation,”—of “settled estates,” with their appendages of conveyances, uses, trusts, jointures, powers, provisoes, and all the other swathings of the parchment mummies which lie interred, unread and unreadable, in the strong boxes of the English aristocracy,—should never be considered to have any application to Cheveleigh. The first person to deviate from the letter of this established rule was the late John Akehurst's father; and this, not from caprice, but from a laudable desire, perfectly in harmony with its spirit, to maintain the honour of the family name in its full integrity. The deviation took place under the following circumstances:—John Akehurst had been married some few years before his union was graced by the appearance of a child, and that child was, as the reader is well aware, a daughter. Another year or two passed, and no addition to the family appeared probable; even had such taken place, it might have been of the feminine gender also. The old gentleman's anxiety upon this

account became overpowering. It was obvious that, if the property descended to John Akehurst, and by him was allowed to devolve according to the family rule, the owner of Cheveleigh might now very possibly be of the weaker sex ; and, being such, might think fit to engage in matrimony ; the inevitable result of which would be that, although Cheveleigh would remain unimpaired, the name and armorial bearings of Akehurst would disappear from the scenes with which they had been so long and proudly identified. In this state of things Mr. Akehurst senior referred to his solicitors. They concurred with him in his anticipations of the possible difficulty, and suggested that the best mode of meeting it would be for him to execute a simple settlement (either by will or by some instrument of present operation) of the whole property ; making it compulsory on the happy man who might intermarry with the daughters of the house of Akehurst to assume its name and arms. After some discussion, John Akehurst acceded to his father's often and warmly expressed wishes upon a point which did not appear to him of much moment. He would have preferred, indeed, retaining the absolute ownership ; but as he had no wish to encumber the property, and his position under the proposed settlement would leave him substantially at liberty to

manage it as he thought fit, he agreed to a destination of the Cheveleigh estates which, after all, his father, as their present absolute possessor, had a perfect right to dictate. The old gentleman, accordingly, who had in his youth kept a term or two at one of the Inns of Court, and had a smattering (rather a dangerous one) of law, proceeded by the aid of some old manuscript "precedents," to develop his ideas of what the settlement (for it had been decided it should not be done by will) should contain. He did not, indeed, assume actually to prepare it in its final stage, but rather to frame a general outline, which his solicitors might either adopt or improve as they thought fit. The result, when completed, was exhibited by the old gentleman with much satisfaction to his son; its material points, stated in popular language, were as follows:— Mr. Akehurst senior was, in the first place, to have the property for his life; after his death, John Akehurst was to succeed to it for his life: both these "tenants for life" (as they were technically called) were invested with the fullest powers for enjoying and exercising control over the estates. On John Akehurst's death (after a short interruption which we shall presently notice) the usual "entail" began. As of course it was still possible that John Ake-

hurst might have sons, the property was in the first instance "entailed" on his sons successively, and their issue male; failing this, there was a similar entail in favour of his daughters; should there be no male issue of the daughters, "of course Cheveleigh will go to Frederick," interrupted John Akehurst. "Just so," replied the old gentleman, "but you see we must express these things in a legal and proper form; it is more correct, in default of your daughter's issue male, to limit the property to *your 'right heirs;'* you will find it always done so in the books. Besides, a limitation in that form keeps up the idea of the old place passing from heir to heir, which we would not have disturbed by this settlement but for that wee lassie of yours, whom I love very dearly notwithstanding." So the settlement was worded accordingly; the only other points which it is necessary to mention being the insertion of the clause we have already referred to, as to the assumption of the Akehurst name and arms by the husbands of females; and a further provision, inserted at John Akehurst's request, that, until the first person entitled under the entail should attain twenty-one, his wife, if she survived both himself and Mr. Akehurst senior, should have the whole income of the property and manage the estates as fully as he was empowered

to do, on the condition only of her making a home for the children meanwhile. The instructions were shortly afterwards sent to the solicitors, who, to gratify the old gentleman, carried them out (excepting where an alteration appeared indispensable) as nearly as possible in his own language. In the course of a week or two the settlement was executed, and deposited, with the title-deeds of the property (which were brought up from Cheveleigh for that purpose), in the custody of Messrs. Neill and Hetherington, with whom they still remained. Mr. Akehurst senior died in the course of the following year, and John Akehurst, who had previously rented a house in the neighbourhood, succeeded to Cheveleigh, where he continued to reside during the considerable interval which elapsed between his father's decease and his own. The natural reserve of John Akehurst in regard to matters of business, and a growing unwillingness to communicate to his wife—on whose real sympathy he could so little reckon—anything which might lead to discussion or unpleasantness, had made him from time to time postpone mentioning the subject at home, until at last the statement of it was prevented by his sudden death. Had it seemed of material consequence to Mrs. Akehurst, he would probably have

felt it his duty to apprise her of it; but as, in fact, it appeared little to affect her, except by a possible addition to her jointure for a few years during the children's minority, he gradually came to treat it as unimportant.

We fear the reader will have found the foregoing detail rather dry, but it is essential to a right comprehension of our story. One other point remains to be noticed, very briefly, before we proceed; it is in reference to Mr. John Akehurst's *will*. On the day of his marriage, full of enthusiasm and admiration for his bride, the young husband had signed a will, previously prepared by a legal friend, giving in a few simple words his whole property, real and personal, to his wife should she survive him. This was not the same will which had been produced after the funeral, but it was identical in its main dispositions. The history of the second will being executed was as follows. The scales do fall from a man's eyes in married life with surprising quickness in some instances; in John Akehurst's case they had begun to do so almost before the termination of the honeymoon. Slowly and inevitably the conviction forced itself upon his mind—we have already adverted to it in our first chapter—that his youthful dream of love had been a mockery and a delusion.

Every day his wife's unreal and utterly frivolous character showed itself in more evident colours; indeed, he seemed to discover even deeper causes for uneasiness. There was a selfishness at all costs; a petty, but implacable jealousy and craving for revenge when thwarted; above all, a singular want of the *mother's* heart of love, the instinct of devotion to the good of the being to whom she has given birth, which made John Akehurst consider very gravely whether he had done wisely in giving her, as he had done, not only his whole property, exclusive of Cheveleigh, but still more, the sole guardianship of his children. Had the property thus given been of larger extent, it might, perhaps, have decided him at once to make an alteration in his will; but the Welsh estates did not do much more than cover Mrs. Akehurst's jointure, which, as we have said, was charged upon them, and the funded property, although considerable, was not of such serious amount as to force itself upon his notice.

Accordingly, he went on from day to day postponing what his better convictions told him ought to be done. Most men dislike making or altering their wills; and John Akehurst, in rude, robust health, had almost a title to expect that his children, the point on which he was most anxious, would grow up to maturity

without having required any guardianship but his own. At length, however, the necessity for making some alteration on both grounds seemed to become more urgent. John Akehurst could not any longer disguise from himself that his wife's tutelage was almost the very last in which it would be desirable to leave either his property or family, and he accordingly, one leisure morning, took out his will for the purpose of a thorough revision. He found the task, however, beyond his powers. He could not even decide at present in what form it would be most desirable to settle the property which would be thus withdrawn from his wife's control, still less would he have felt competent to couch any projected settlement of it in technical language. Ultimately, therefore, he resolved to postpone the execution of his design until the spring, when he would be in town, and able to confer with Neill and Hetherington (whom he preferred employing for this business) upon the subject. He was about to replace the existing will in the drawer from which he had taken it, when, by one of those trivial accidents, if such they are, which sometimes lead to important results, his raised arm overturned the ink-glass which he had placed by his side to commence writing, and part of its contents were spilt upon the will. John Akehurst was neat

and precise in his habits almost to a fault. The document looked so untidy, that he hesitated to replace it in the drawer, and finally, the rain which had confined him during the morning still continuing, having nothing in-doors particularly to occupy his attention, and the will being very brief, he decided on re-copying it, taking the opportunity at the same time to add some trifling annuities and legacies to its contents, which he had long wished to specify, and which might serve as instructions for the more formal instrument. The copy was rapidly made, being word for word identical, except as regards the additions above-mentioned, with the former will. When it was completed, John Akehurst paused for a moment. It occurred to him, that without altering at present the disposition of the property, he might have named some other guardian. The subject, however, was very painful to him; the alteration besides could not now be made without re-copying the entire draft, and the whole matter would be put on a proper footing next spring. It happened, too, that a servant entered just then with a note requiring an immediate answer. Under all circumstances, Mr. Akehurst determined on leaving things as they were; and having despatched his answer to the note, desired the man to return at once with two other of

the domestics. In their presence the new will was duly signed, and replaced in the receptacle from which its predecessor had been taken; the latter Mr. Akehurst carelessly tossed into the fire, where it soon blazed away and was forgotten.

No other will was ever made. When Mr. Akehurst visited town next spring, the subject recurred to his mind, and, as we have seen, was mentioned by him to Frederick, whom he then met. But it proceeded no further. A great reluctance to approach the subject, even in his own mind, induced John Akehurst to defer his instructions to the solicitors from one day to another, until at last the season was expired. The matter indeed had appeared of less consequence now, as a negotiation had taken place for the purchase of some landed property adjacent to Cheveleigh, which would have absorbed the whole of the money in the funds, while the purchased land was intended to be conveyed in such a form as should exactly correspond to the Cheveleigh settlement. The bargain, however, was never carried out, and John Akehurst returned to Cheveleigh determined to see his solicitors without fail on the subject of the new will in the spring following, but troubling himself very little about the matter meanwhile. He had apparently long years of life before him; who could

have foreseen that in less than three months the hand that should have executed the long deferred intention would be cold and motionless in the grave?

Reader, we crave thy pardon for this long and, we fear, somewhat wearisome explanation. Upon the circumstances we have detailed, trivial as some of them may appear, were in effect depending the issues of life and death.

CHAP. VII.

“ But mine shall be the ivy bough
That canopies the bard's pale brow,
And mine the dance o'er dewy lawn
Of amorous nymph and laughing Faun.”

HOR. *Od.* I. i. 29.

THE day of the *fête* which was to celebrate the first public performance of Mr. Bilderbit's cascades and *jets d'eau* had at length arrived. Not so Mrs. Akehurst's parcel, with the copy of the mysterious settlement. Conveyance and transport were less rapid then than they have since become, and Mrs. Akehurst's mind, only partially enlightened by her solicitor's letter, was kept in a most painful state of suspense and agitation. Most gladly would she have consigned Mr. Bilderbit, the *fête*, the company, and all connected with them, to the celebrated retirements of Jericho or the Red Sea, so galling and irksome had the necessity of continual gaiety and the restraints of society become in the almost unbearable anxiety and vexation to which she was now

incessantly a prey. But such an expatriation of large bodies of people, or even of individuals, however devoutly desired, is not proportionably easy of execution; and the guests, as was to be expected, hung on at Cheveleigh, like the suitors in the palace of the wandering Ulysses, laughing, talking, eating, drinking, dancing, making merry, and generally diverting and disporting themselves, with an hilarity and satisfaction in every body and about every thing which jarred upon Mrs. Akehurst's highly-strung and excited nerves, hardly less than it did upon the heart-broken but constant Penelope. To the irritated mind of their hostess, it seemed as if her visitors should have had an intuition of the disturbance under which she was suffering, and she almost resented their exuberant and perpetual mirth as an insult to her wounded spirits. No better vent presented itself for this mental excoriation than poor Lucy, who was condemned occasionally, even in public, to undergo explosions of spleen and ill-temper for which she could not even devise any cause, amid the animated expressions and outward tokens of gaiety and interest in all around her with which her mother was obliged to mask her real uneasiness.

What had most added to Mrs. Akehurst's inward

vexation during the last few days had been the preparations for the *fête* aforesaid, which, as we have already intimated, had been conceived on the most magnificent scale, and could not subsequently be retrenched without comment. Much of the labour connected with these had indeed been removed by the employment of *artistes* of first-rate eminence from town, under whose hands both the details and the general arrangement of the festivities progressed with a celerity and ease which were almost incredible. Still, constant reference to Mrs. Akehurst was necessary on some point or other connected with the approaching event, and the recurrence of these applications, coupled with the prodigious drain upon her purse, to which we have adverted in a former chapter, and the continued non-arrival of the parcel from Messrs. Neill and Hetherington, had, by the time the actual day for the *fête* arrived (which, as we have said, was about the middle of October), stimulated that lady's feelings to a pitch of acrimony almost beyond endurance.

The performances which were to usher in the avatar of the water-god evoked by Mr. Bilderbit's genius, were various and elaborately contrived. They were to commence with private theatricals;

for which purpose an original piece in five acts had been produced by the active pen of Mr. Blubb, whose muse, deserting for a time the calmer field of narrative and didactic poetry, now embarked with great distinction in the romantic career of melodrame. The entire piece was supposed to typify the birth and subsequent history of the stream which now for the first time was to flow in its unwonted channel. In the first act, Arethusa was to be seen, pursued by her impatient lover, and finally plunging from the Acroceraunian steep (for Mr. Blubb followed Shelley in his somewhat loose geography) into the briny ocean, with whose waters however the crystal stream would not mingle, but re-appear in unsullied purity on the shores of Sicily. The ocean for the present purpose was supposed to be represented by the upper reservoir, of which we have spoken, which had previously been filled by the tunnel communicating with the pond; it being contrived that a few seconds after Arethusa had made her plunge, a lofty column of water should rise into the air from the lower extremity of the basin, being in fact supplied from a large cistern, erected for the occasion at the rear of one of the architect's plaster temples, where it was completely out of sight. On the subsidence of the column, the concealed tap we

have previously adverted to, from the reservoir, was to be turned on, and the stream thereby set at liberty to flow down the flights of steps and artificial channels prepared for its reception, as if it had derived its parentage from the fountain in which Arethusa was thus supposed to have returned to the upper world. The only difficulty in this part of the performance was the representation of Arethusa's leap; but the Acroceraunian range, and all the other stage effects, were in the hands of a London manager, under whose auspices the persecuted nymph (in the person of one Mdlle. Victorine, of the — theatre), having gracefully descended into the abyss, by the aid of movable ropes and pulleys, was to be admitted with great dexterity into a pasteboard trap-door near the base of the mountain; the commotion which it might be supposed the unexpected entrance of a young lady would occasion in the briny element, being represented by the vicarious immersion of two or three bags of duck-shot.

In the second and two following acts the scene was to be laid lower down the river, which was by this time presumed to be pursuing the gentle tenor of its way until absorbed in the large oval reservoir we have described near the bottom of the glade. In this scene the tragic interest of the piece com-

menced. Down a slope of arid mountains, basking in the heat of the noon-day sun, a mounted warrior, armed from head to foot, was to be seen descending upon the once barren plain, now a smiling and fertile valley, which bordered the course of the stream. On reaching the bottom of the slope, he was to be encountered by a knight similarly armed, but apparently his senior, and as it would seem of a choleric turn of mind, who would presently, from some unexplained cause, pick a quarrel with the first knight, resulting there and then in a furious passage of arms. The quarrelsome individual was to be unhorsed and thrown to the ground with great violence; upon which his late adversary was to dismount, and unclasp the helmet of his fallen foe, whom he would thereby discover to be his own uncle. Wringing his hands in great distress, the youthful knight would attract the notice of the king's daughter, who was supposed by a fortunate coincidence to be rambling unwittingly in the same direction. The attendants of the princess being despatched to the river for water, she and the young cavalier were presumed each to prop up one shoulder of the discomfited knight, and on the arrival of the limpid element to dash large quantities of it in his face; upon which the old gentleman, not being

addicted to much ablution, would raise himself from his swoon, and remounting his steed, ride off testily the same way he came. The princess being naturally agitated with recent occurrences, the younger knight would then escort her home, communicating at the same time that he had recently arrived in her father's capital, and burned to signalise himself by feats of arms. This concluded the second act.

In the third act, various passages of an amorous tendency were to take place between the princess and her recent companion, ending in a formal declaration of attachment on the part of the cavalier, and a vow of mutual constancy sealed upon the ruby lips of the young lady. An unexpected obstacle, however, would now arise in the paternal parent of the princess, whose name and place of abode did not transpire, but who was evidently a person of a harsh and brutal disposition, his first act on receiving the intelligence being to banish the youthful lover from his dominions under pain of immediate decapitation. This act of tyranny was to be attributed to two causes; one being that the knight, although he stated himself to have considerable expectations, was not at present in the possession of much available capital, in fact, labouring under aggravated symptoms of im-

pecuniosity ; while, in the second place, even had he been an unobjectionable party, the king had as good as promised his daughter's hand to an old and very ugly monarch in the vicinity, who curiously enough turns out to be the knight's uncle, who had been on his way to commence his courtship when he had been so severely handled by his nephew. Eventually, the young lady's governor, finding that his considerate conduct had not produced in her such a compliance with his wishes as he might reasonably have expected, confines her in a tower nine stories high, where she solaces herself with needlework, and a refection of bread and water twice in the twenty-four hours.

In the fourth act, a feature of new and startling interest is added to the piece, by the appearance of a large dragon (or some cognate monster), who inhabits a kind of jungle near the river, and being apparently an animal of good taste, exacts from the province which he has selected for his residence, a *douceur* of fifteen tender young virgins every month. The elderly unmarried females of the community appear to acquiesce in this dispensation with a calm and resigned frame of mind, but it occasions extensive discontent among the gentlemen, several of whom having been slain in single combat with the

monster, the king is at last induced to offer a large reward and the hand of his daughter to any one who will free the country from such a scourge. Very opportunely, the choleric monarch in the neighbourhood is at the same time assassinated by his own butler, at the instigation of conspirators.

The fifth act was a triumph of dramatic invention. To view this the spectators were to move still lower down the stream, and occupy a position on the banks of the large oval basin or lake into which it would now discharge itself. In the centre of this piece of water was a desert island, in which the virgins, now amounting to some scores, had been imprisoned by the monster, apparently for the purpose of undergoing some fattening process. In the opening scene they were to appear clustered in various attitudes of terror on their rocky fastness, the dragon having at length appeared in the vicinity of the island, and having already yawned twice in the direction of the wind quarter, which was a well-known indication of his being hungry. At that precise moment, a knight, accoutred in black armour, was to appear on the opposite side of the island, and rapidly perceiving the posture of affairs, was to seize the opportunity, when the dragon yawned for the third and last time, of introducing his lance into the monster's stomach. The dragon,

resenting this interference with his digestive organs, would then turn upon his assailant, and a ferocious contest ensue, in which the knight was to be victorious, and feeling faint, and thereupon removing his helmet, to present to the delighted spectators the countenance of the princess's young man. It would then transpire that the dragon had been sent by Arethusa, who appeared to consider that she had been rather snubbed by the inhabitants generally, considering the improvement in the value of property on the banks of the new river, but was now disposed to relent; having, in fact, instigated the princess's young man to destroy the dragon; the only conditions imposed by her being the erection of a temple to her honour. Upon this, the liberated damsels (who were *coryphées* from the London theatre) would execute a dance and chorale in honour of Arethusa; and the king, having kept his promise in regard to his daughter, and also abdicated in the knight's favour, and the avuncular dominions having also fallen to the latter as next heir, the marriage would be celebrated with great splendour, and the young couple enter on a course of unprecedented happiness and prosperity. In the concluding scene, a procession of the entire corps was to take place from the bottom of the glade to a peristyle structure

of Mr. Bilderbit's near its top, which was thereupon to be dedicated as a temple to the goddess, and thus terminate the representation.

The *fête* was intended to commence about eleven o'clock; and it being calculated that Mr. Blubb's melodrame would occupy some two or three hours, it was not improbable that at the end of that time the company might, in the language of the vulgar, be somewhat "sharp-set." Accordingly it had been arranged that on the cessation of the plaudits which it was anticipated would greet the closing scene, an Indian chief, habited with a disregard of some of the supposed essentials of dress which would make it appear that he had extensively "reformed his tailor's bills," was to advance in company with his squaw, and invite the assembled guests to a cold collation in the wigwams of the tribe, which had been pitched, with that view, in a romantic hollow nearly adjoining the scene of the performances. This being despatched, the company were to be regaled till dusk with various entertainments in different parts of the grounds, comprising human singing birds in the trees, walkers on stilts, ascents on the tight rope, jugglers, athletes, and similar recreations; which it was rightly supposed would furnish sufficient occupation during the interval which must elapse before the

great event of the day could take place. This was a display of fireworks, which was to be exhibited on the desert island in the lake; in which the jungle and other appropriate embellishments of the dragon scene were, during the absence of the guests in the above-mentioned avocations, to be replaced by the miscellaneous and grotesque devices of pyrotechnic science. The proceedings of the day were to be closed by a brilliant ball at Cheveleigh Court, for which its handsome saloons, profusely decorated for the occasion, united every advantage of convenience and space. The receptions at the ball, indeed, were not so numerous as they might have been under other circumstances, Mrs. Akehurst having felt it more decorous, under her still comparatively recent loss, greatly to curtail the number of the invitations she was accustomed to send to these gatherings.

It will gratify the reader to learn that the entertainments, of which we have endeavoured to furnish a slight programme, passed off with entire success. The weather, notwithstanding the late period of the year, was magnificent throughout; every thing happened as it was intended; no disappointments, no failures. Fire and water, for instance, both did their duty. The aqueous element, slightly diminished in volume by the drought of the last few months, soared

into air, burrowed through earth, trickled over the torture of its stone steps, wandered in the monotony of its formal channels, and reposed in the mimic lake where it was at length relieved from duty, in complete obedience to the arrangements of its patron and present showman, Mr. Bilderbit. Its more subtle sister, also trained for the nonce, and put through its paces amid the applause of the eager spectators, whirled, twisted, blazed, hissed, crackled, spouted, leapt aloft (where the freer spirits of the sky were riding in the ebon vault overhead); counterfeited the flowers and gems of the nether world, flashed in marvellous colours, melted in crystalline streams of light, and performed unheard of feats and evolutions which must have afforded the tenants of the old rookery near the churchyard matter for speculation and debate for many a long winter's evening afterwards. Nothing again could exceed the resources of the wigwams, which, far from offering the revelation of the mysteries of cannibalism which might have been anticipated from their exterior, exhibited all the delicacies of the season, in Gunter's best style; the vintages of France and Burgundy sparkled in the glasses, and rare exotics lent their bloom and perfume to the brilliancy of the feast.

Merrily and pleasantly, when this part of the pro-

minated — “when hunger was appeased, the desire of eating had subsided,” as Virgil not only ironically amplifies the common-place of “the dinner;” — merrily and pleasantly did the guests saunter along the terraces, and amid the glades of Cheveleigh, discovering at every step a fresh attraction among the various objects of interest reserved for this portion of the programme, and commenting with no unfriendly criticism on the performances which thus whiled away the hour. Very successful, too, was Mr. Blubb’s performance; the author was loudly called for, and vociferously cheered at its conclusion; and both author and actors retired from the stage with a well-merited reputation. Brilliant, too, was the ball which closed up the day’s entertainments; all the more so, perhaps, from its not being over-crowded. Lightly and brightly, amid the festooned halls and echoing corridors, moved the agile step of youth, the apparitions of beauty, the tide of pleasure and gaiety, whirling in the rapid dance, murmuring in light-hearted tones of undistinguishable voices; all in good accord, as it were, with the mirth and joyfulness of the music and the sparkling lustres which shone with magic splendour over the scene; as if with the strains of melody there mingled no under-song

from the chequered emotions of the quivering human heart, no presentiment of man's portion of toil and suffering, no voice from the mysterious spirit-world around ; as if, behind the dancers and underneath the flashing lights, there glided not along the panelled wall the reflections of doubt and terror, and the dark shadows of the tomb !

There were but two persons at Cheveleigh that day who formed an exception to the general feeling of satisfaction which appeared to pervade the assembled company ; these were the guardsman, Mr. Anstruther, and the person for whose gratification the whole *fête* had been planned, Mrs. Akehurst. Lucy, indeed, regretted the long absence from Charles's sick room which was entailed upon her by the entertainments of the day, and her mother's express and positive commands for her attendance. Still, as she mingled in the various scenes of the *fête*, and was compelled to dismiss for the time the causes of grief and anxiety which usually weighed upon her, her attention became interested in what was going on, and she watched, both with amusement and pleasure, the various objects, grotesque and beautiful, which were exhibited in the course of the afternoon. The guardsman and Mrs. Akehurst were not so fortunate. The former, indeed,

was not a person who appeared to have much capacity for enjoying or evincing interest in any external object, whatever its character might be; he usually wrapped himself in the mantle of his own superciliousness and exclusion, and exhibited a kind of sublime indifference to the pursuits and emotions of mankind in general, which did great credit to his education. On the present occasion, however, it so happened that a certain *contretemps* occurred which occasioned him considerable vexation and chagrin; and although, in the abyss of *ennui* in which he was generally plunged, it might have been considered a luxury to have experienced even these sensations (just as hunger and nakedness might probably be not undesirable conditions of existence to an alderman in the dog days), still the calamity which Mr. Anstruther encountered, and the annoyance attending it, had the effect of making his dissatisfaction at the day's proceedings positive instead of merely negative. To explain the misfortune which befell this suffering individual, we must premise that the spouting zinc tree, to which we have already referred, had been found, on a previous trial of the waterworks, not to act quite to Mr. Bilderbit's satisfaction. The concealed pipes in one of the main branches had apparently got clogged, and the limb accordingly had,

by Mr. Bilderbit's order, been unscrewed and taken into W—— for cleaning and repairs. Meanwhile, in pushing forward the other works so as to be ready in time for the *fête*, the communication of this tree with the upper reservoir (from which it was intended to be supplied) had been postponed, and, with the view of making the trial of it above-mentioned, a hose had been temporarily attached to the trunk, uniting itself with the pipe from the cistern by which the fountain, that was to signify by its appearance Arethusa's safe arrival on Sicilian soil, was to be supplied. Now it fell out that the guardsman, with his usual philosophical indifference to the pursuits and pleasures of his fellow-men, had, at the commencement of the melodrame, sauntered away from the company, who were arranged in various groups, some sitting and some standing, in front of the upper pool, to witness Arethusa's plunge; and, pursuing a winding path through a shrubbery closely adjoining the open glade, he arrived at the zinc tree, which formed a conspicuous feature in the walk. Mr. Anstruther slightly elevated his eyebrows at this object—he would have done little more if the walking wood of Birnam had suddenly crossed his path—and feeling at the moment equal to the exertion of lighting a cigar, he reclined in an easy at-

titude against the tree, and commenced smoking, exhibiting to the rest of the company, who were in full sight, a spectacle of aristocratic isolation from vulgar interests which greatly enlarged the ideas of the more ardent votaries of fashion among their number. The various exclamations and comments which greeted Arethusa's flight, and her leap from the Greek promontory, produced no alteration either in Mr. Anstruther's countenance or in the composed station which he still maintained against the trunk, quite unprepared for the part he was himself to bear in the day's performance. After the lapse, however, of a few seconds, which, as we have said, was supposed to represent the period of the fugitive nymph's submarine excursion, a tall column of water, according to the arrangement we have already described, rose gracefully into the air from the extremity of the reservoir, intimating her re-appearance in the regions of daylight. Nearly at the same moment, from the amputated limb of the zinc tree (the hose to the reservoir having accidentally been left attached), emerged a copious stream equal in force and dimensions to the jet of a large fire engine, and so completely drenching the guardsman, who was almost blown from his post by the vehemence of this watery explosion, as to draw from

him the unprecedented occurrence of an anathema of the whole transaction, uttered in a voice loud and angry enough to attract the notice of the assembled company. Mr. Alstruther, being thoroughly wet through, returned to the house at his best pace, running the gauntlet of merciless shouts of laughter all the way; and was actually so much disturbed from his usual elevation of thought and language, that at the subsequent refecton in the wigwams he was heard to ask for a slice of veal like an ordinary mortal, instead of signifying, as he might otherwise have done, his willingness to allow himself to be helped to "some of that *caaf*."

The other exception to the general hilarity was, as we have said, and as the reader may have surmised without our assistance, Mrs. Akehurst. *Her* vexations were of a far more serious character. Independently of the state of acrimony to which she had been worked up at this period, by various circumstances already noticed, it so happened, by a caprice of fortune which ought not to have befallen one so estimable, that the long-looked-for parcel from the London solicitors arrived, of all unfortunate times, just on this very afternoon of the long-looked-for *fête*. Orders had been given for some days past that the parcel should be brought to Mrs. Akehurst

immediately on its arrival. Accordingly, happening to be delivered in the kitchen department, where Mrs. Akehurst's anxiety for its appearance was well known, the maid who took it in, construing the direction too literally, and being unable to take it herself, despatched it to the scene of the *fête* by a raw country wench, who was the only messenger then available, the principal domestics being occupied in arranging the repast under the wigwams. This envoy chanced to reach the ground just as the dragon was commencing the series of yawns which led to such a premature termination of his career; and, being wholly unused to melodrama in her native hamlet, dropped the despatch at her mistress's feet, with a terrified shriek and an exclamation of "Lawk-a-daisy, be un alive?" which would have brought down Mrs. Akehurst's severe displeasure on her, had it not been for the throbbing interest in the contents of the ordinary-looking brown paper package beside her, which almost choked her breath and utterance. Sorely did she long to lift it from the ground, and ascertain her fate then and there; but it was impossible under the circumstances; and with an ill-concealed chagrin, Mrs. Akehurst ordered the girl to take the parcel home, and directed that it should be placed in her room.

Grievously, indeed, was the entertainer at that brilliant *fête* tried through all the rest of the long, apparently interminable, day ; it seemed as if the more inward vexation she felt, the more every one round her talked and laughed and jested ; the morsels she was compelled to taste of Gunter's collation, unimpeachable as it was, felt to her like eating so much chopped straw. The discussions on the play, the actors, the new cascade and fountains, Mr. Anstruther's calamity, the fineness of the weather, the extent and picturesque beauty of Cheveleigh Park, seemed to her either intolerably dull, monotonous and incessant, or else to grate upon the fierce passion and feverish anxiety which were consuming her, as if the speakers had selected their topics with the express purpose of insult and aggravation. Never had an entertainment contrived with such prodigal expense and long-continued preparation, resulted in such entire disappointment to its originator.

After the collation, things were no better. Mrs. Akehurst had hoped to find the opportunity then of retreating to the house for an hour or two, unobserved, but it proved out of the question ; one group after another engaged her services as hostess, the dull requiring to be amused, the lively to impart their satisfaction ; one after another, these idlers,

with nothing to do (as she bitterly thought) but chatter and roam about in busy indolence, fastened upon her like vampires—her, who had *such* interests to absorb and rivet her every faculty;—clustering, droning on, never weary, never giving her the chance of escape, summoning up in retribution against her, as it were, the voluble hollowness of her own usual conversation and unreality. Had the entertainment taken place nearer the house, she might perhaps, on one or two occasions, have found the means of eluding her persecutors, and securing a brief absence, but the Court was, as the reader is aware, at some distance, and could only be reached by mounting the hill along the open footpath, which, especially as hostess, she could not have done without exciting observation and surprise. Her last chance disappeared when, about an hour before the fireworks commenced, she was accosted by the solemn and rather magniloquent Sir Andrew Milward, from whose rounded periods and elaborate enunciation of common places she knew there was no escape if conversation once commenced; while his presence at Cheveleigh, as nearly the only member of the older county families who had accepted Mrs. Akehurst's invitation, was too important to allow of her treating him with any want of ceremony. She accordingly resigned herself

to her fate; and experienced almost a relief when the approach of dusk and the increased activity which the preparations on the desert island began to exhibit, obliged her to quit the stately baronet, for the purpose of arranging the guests (who had begun to muster at these indications), in their allotted seats under a covered wooden structure, which had been erected for their accommodation.

At length, when the last blue light had burnt out, and the last cracker been expended,—Mrs. Akehurst could not comprehend how grown men and women *could* keep up these childish diversions with such unflagging zest and assiduity; — at length, when the hostess's patience was almost utterly worn out, there was a general move towards the house, and Mrs. Akehurst hoped that, in the interval which would elapse before the change of costume necessary for an appearance in the ball-room had been effected, she might find time to peruse the all-important papers which were now within her reach. But fortune was again unpropitious; the country wench, far more occupied with the dragon than with her mistress's orders, had deposited the parcel in the wrong room, and it was only after considerable inquiry and delay that Mrs. Akehurst at last saw it laid on her own dressing-table. Then, one or two of the men-ser-

vants were so manifestly the worse for their libations after the *fête*, that, with the strings still uncut, Mrs. Akehurst's interference was indispensably required in aid of the old housekeeper, whose feeble voice in vain endeavoured to recall the offenders to their allegiance. Lastly, when this domestic broil was appeased by forcible measures, Mrs. Akehurst's French maid, with that considerate regard to time and place which characterises servants, selected the moment of her return to her toilette chamber for the announcement (accompanied with vehement cries, sobs, and protestations, and a profusion of gesticulations), that she, the French damsel, was "injured and betrayed;" that she was, "Oh! the most unfortunate and unhappy individual in all the world;" and, in brief, that if "Monsieur Roosale" (by whom the betrayed female indicated the butler Russell), was to continue in his place, "*le scélérat*," she must to-morrow drown herself in the new lake, or inhale the fumes of charcoal, or in some other way anticipate her natural demise. Mrs. Akehurst found that the only way of stopping the torrent for a moment was to give the Frenchwoman's excited feelings the relief of stating her grievance; the main feature of which appeared to be, as far as could be gathered from the narrator's incoherent account, and the frequent interjections, of

a desponding and suicidal character, with which it was interspersed, that Mr. Russell, who for some weeks previously had distinguished the fair Parisian with a large share of his attentions (which she was herself sufficiently disposed to reciprocate), had now, with the usual fickleness of his sex, transferred his regard to a waiting-woman of Lady Milward's, "*une véritable Anglaise*," as Annette indiscreetly termed her, with rosy red cheeks, and eyes as black as sloes; the faithless lover's desertion having culminated on the present day, during which he had not even spoken, "not one single word," Mademoiselle Annette said, to herself, while her hateful rival had strutted about the grounds in the full light and splendour of this majestic individual's notice. The deserted maiden's story was at last brought to a conclusion, more from utter exhaustion and want of breath than any other cause, and Mrs. Akehurst having succeeded in inducing her to leave the room for a few minutes, approached the parcel once more, her whole frame throbbing with eagerness to glean some idea of its contents. But she was again doomed to disappointment. The fireworks had occupied much longer time than was anticipated, and during Annette's discourse, a series of ominous knocks and rings had been going on at the hall-door, indicating

the arrival of guests from the neighbourhood who had not been present at the *fête*, but had received invitations to the ball with which it was to terminate. An intimation being conveyed to Mrs. Akehurst that these new comers were already assembling in considerable force in the drawing-room, she was obliged hastily to recall Annette and despatch her toilette with all the speed possible, descending to the drawing-room, in fact, only at a period when her presence as hostess was becoming indispensable. And thus half-a-dozen weary hours of expectation and suspense were added to the long previous trials of the day. Mrs. Akehurst groaned inwardly, in bitter endurance of the festive scene; the music, the dancing, the light talk and jest, were so much gall and wormwood to her wounded spirit.

At length, the last departure was announced, the last carriage rolled away; the embers of the ball, which still continued to burn with no lack of fervour in some few of the home visitors, who appeared disposed to keep it up till daylight, were confined to a class sufficiently juvenile to be disregarded, and Mrs. Akehurst was at liberty to retire to her unmolested solitude. After a few minutes, she dispensed with Annette's further services, and proceeded with a trembling hand to

untie the momentous parcel. It contained nothing but a copy of the settlement (the purport of which we have already explained to the reader), accompanied by a short note from Messrs. Neill and Hetherington. Mrs. Akehurst, with burning temples, sate down to the perusal of the cumbrous document. Hardly, indeed, could she have wormed her way through the tangled forest of iteration, the "*Ciminia sylvæ*" of conveyancers, the protection of their cherished fastnesses; in the intricacies of which the unhappy adventurer, who may be desirous of penetrating into the clearer regions of intelligibility and common sense, becomes involved, and wanders up and down in hapless despair. But, in the present instance, the solicitors had been good-natured enough to mark the more important passages in pencil for their client's benefit, as well as to append marginal notes, serving as a kind of clue to the labyrinth, and forming a short epitome of its contents. Mrs. Akehurst had no great difficulty, therefore, in comprehending the main features of the settlement, with which the reader is now, we trust, more or less familiar. Eagerly she scanned the succession "limitations;" the "life estates" to her husband's father and himself, now rendered inoperative by their deaths; the provision, intro-

duced by John Akehurst's thoughtful kindness, by which she was herself to have the enjoyment and management of the property until the entail took effect in one of her children, on the easy condition of finding them a home meanwhile; the entail, first in the male and then in the female line; the direction (to which the settlement had owed its existence) that the husbands of females should assume the name and arms of Akehurst; finally, the limitation to "*the right heirs*" of John Akehurst, under which designation Mrs. Akehurst appeared to recognise without difficulty the fact, that on failure of her husband's own issue, the magnificent estates of Cheveleigh would pass to one so distasteful to her as his brother *Frederick Akehurst*.

She was too weary in mind and body for much accurate reflection that night on the state of things thus suddenly disclosed to her. That she had lost Cheveleigh; that she must sink, after a few years of doubtful position there as her children's guardian, into the position of mere moderate competence guaranteed to her by her own jointure (even if this still remained intact); that she had squandered the considerable funded property which would in some degree have palliated her loss; finally, that she had involved herself in pecuniary liabilities to

Butler and the other money-lenders, she hardly knew to what precise amount, but beyond question, largely and heavily; all these were considerations which coursed through Mrs. Akehurst's fevered brain in wild succession, as frightful undoubted facts, but still without her being able to realise their full import, or arrange them in any tangible and consecutive shape.

Bitterly as Mrs. Akehurst felt the position in which she was now so unexpectedly placed, with its vivid contrasts to what had been, and sombre anticipations for the future, it may seem singular that, in the whirling current of her thoughts, the one point which rose to the surface with far greater frequency and distinctness than any other, was the "ulterior limitation" (as it would be technically termed) to Frederick Akehurst. This was, of course, a comparatively unimportant matter, operating as it did only in a contingency which might well be regarded as distant and improbable. Still, it recurred to Mrs. Akehurst's mind, with a feeling of vexation and chagrin, much disproportioned to its real significance. It seemed, of course, without any sufficient grounds for the feeling, as if she could have acquiesced better in her present untoward position, if *she* had been at least named in the

ultimate disposition of the property, or if Frederick Akehurst had not been the person so named ; and over and over again she went through the subject in all its bearings, as if *this* were the principal fact she had elicited from the perusal of the instrument. However, she was too exhausted in mind and body to allow of further reflection ; and after a racking but futile consideration for some hours of the topics thus forced upon her, just as daylight was breaking Mrs. Akehurst retired to such rest as circumstances would permit, blending in her feverish and dis-tempered dreams, like some of the quaint carvings of our Gothic ancestors, the grotesque devices of Mr. Blubb's melodrame with those sterner realities, the hatred and envy, the cupidity and revenge, all those demon powers of the strangely compounded human heart, which are the instigators of its misdeeds on earth, and the avengers of its future doom.

CHAP. VIII.

" So much avail in years to come
The habits of thy childhood's home."

VIRG. *Georg.* 2, 272

It was late on the following morning before Mrs. Akehurst descended to the study, which was now, since business arrangements had occupied more of her time, her usual sitting-room, when the attention due to her visitors did not require her presence elsewhere. Her head still throbbing with the excitement and worry of the previous day, she sate down at her husband's library table, and placing the fatal settlement before her, once more endeavoured to review her position. But the feelings of rage and disappointment were still too powerful within her to allow of her entering upon the subject with any degree of calmness. Unconsciously to herself she had, notwithstanding Messrs. Neill and Hetherington's previous letters, cherished an undefined hope that the settlement to which they alluded might not be of a

nature to prove entirely destructive of the position in society and the prospects of a continuance of the means of luxury and indulgence which constituted, as Mrs. Akehurst could not but feel, all that she had attached the least value to in life. These once gone, existence seemed a heavy and insupportable burden, wholly devoid of intellectual resources, incapable of deriving the enjoyment, which even the least affluent may feel, from the lavish beauties of nature, and the possession of health, liberty, and the power of useful employment ; above all, destitute of the right motives and principles of action. Mrs. Akehurst's future, as a person of limited means, or what appeared to her such, offered to her view a hopeless blank. Even the natural affections, which strike their kindly roots and blossom with brightness and joy under many a thatched roof in the poverty-stricken homes of toil, had with her become buried under a long course of selfishness ; indeed, it was difficult to believe that they had ever been really implanted in that uncongenial heart. Even from the earliest years of infancy, her children, who, as we have said, were not reared by herself, had never known the pitying eye, the caressing hand, the kindly tones of love and tenderness, which are the very instincts of a mother's being. In lieu of these, a

inconsiderable part in this veracious history, the reader will perhaps pardon us if we briefly sketch the antecedents of so estimable an individual.

Justin Butler was the son of a small tradesman in a market town of some antiquity and importance in one of the southern counties. His father died when he was still young, and left his widow and child entirely destitute. The family had always maintained a decent position, and by the charity of some affluent residents the boy was put to school, the mother being at the same time established in the tenancy of two sombre-looking but comfortable rooms adjoining the basement of one of the old gateways of the town, the upper part of which formed the church of a diminutive parish, immediately outside the gate. Mrs. Butler's duties in the cottage were a sinecure; she was *supposed* to close and open the massive wooden doors, which for years past had ceased to creak upon their rusty hinges for the nightly protection of the townsmen. The sinecure, however, would have failed to excite the indignation of even the keenest financial reformer, for it only brought in two shillings a week, and Mrs. Butler would have starved in the cottage which she occupied rent-free, but for the occasional assistance of her former patrons, and her promotion, in the course of a year or two, to

a post hardly, indeed, more lucrative, or less of a sinecure, of pew-opener to the little church up-stairs. To the above sources of income, Mrs. Butler made some addition from time to time, by attendance as a sick nurse.

It was some years before Butler was off his mother's hands. During his school-days he displayed considerable ability, not only in learning (which indeed he did well), but in the acquisition and employment of capital, by lending the pence and half-pence with which he was occasionally presented by good-natured friends, at usurious interest to his schoolfellows; such payment in kind as a knife or ball of string being willingly accepted by him when ready money was not forthcoming, and an active and highly profitable retail trade driven in the commodities thus obtained for frequently only a fraction of their value. The youthful Butler was not a miser, however; his acquisitiveness of disposition did not arise from any desire of hoarding and secreting his treasures, but rather from a full appreciation of their usefulness in procuring the indulgences of life, of which he accordingly took a competent share, not with a spendthrift or prodigal extravagance, but like a person who knew exactly what they were worth, and paused in his pursuit of them, when their

cost threatened to be excessive. At the expiration of a few years, however, the lad's evident quickness and intelligence had attracted the attention of his masters, and a report being made to the friends who had previously helped the family, they procured him a situation as clerk to a solicitor of high respectability, in the somewhat distant town of W——, with which our readers are already familiar. Finding that his clerk's services promised to be of value, and his own health at the same time rather failing, the solicitor, Mr. Wearing, after a year or two's probation, generously offered him his articles at a trifling premium, the expense of which was defrayed by the parties who had recommended him to the situation, and who at the same time guaranteed him a small allowance for his support until he could commence practice. This, Butler, who was always industrious enough when required, and who felt the desirableness of a well-filled purse quite as strongly as ever, eked out into a tolerably comfortable maintenance by copying and other work at over-hours, as well as by frequent gifts from his employer, who treated him with considerable indulgence.

The term of Butler's apprenticeship had hardly expired before a highly important change took place in his position. Mr. Wearing had an only son, who

had also been brought up for the legal profession, and was destined to succeed him in his business. George Wearing, however, exhibited small capacity or inclination for his work ; he was easily led, self-indulgent, and promising to be the ready prey of sharpers and false friends ; and the father, whose now rapidly declining health appeared to warn him of his own speedy removal from the scene of toil, saw with inexpressible pain that the old-established reputation and thriving business of the office would fall into the hands of one who had neither the professional knowledge nor character to sustain it. Under these circumstances, after long and anxious consideration, Mr. Wearing, who had experienced considerable assistance from Butler's ability and general steadiness, decided on taking him into partnership. During the old gentleman's life Butler was to be remunerated at a salary ; afterwards he was to have one-fourth of the profits of the business, young Wearing taking the remainder.

Butler was now in a comfortable position. His mother, meanwhile, had felt the growing infirmities of age, and was no longer able to earn anything as a nurse ; even the discharge of her duties as pew-opener was obliged to be entrusted to a subordinate, whose payment weighed heavily upon the poor

woman's resources. The friends to whom she and her family had been so largely indebted, had, in several instances, died off during the last two or three years; her daily wants, the nourishment and indispensible supplies of falling health, fuel, medicine, warm clothing, became more and more pressing; bitter poverty, or its substitute, the workhouse, appeared to stare her in the face. She had one other resource, her son.

Butler experienced some perplexity of mind as to what must be done under these circumstances. His mother had made no direct application to him hitherto, and it being some year or two since her son had visited the parental roof, he had contrived, whatever his surmises might be, to escape the actual cognizance of a fact which might lead to an unpleasant curtailment of some of his usual sources of enjoyment. Unhappily for this ingenious arrangement, a neighbour, more zealous than discreet, who was aware of Butler's present residence and circumstances, wrote to represent his mother's growing ailments and privations, with a plainness which could not be eluded. Butler had now to strike the balance, which he always did with great nicety and distinctness, between the certain outlay of capital which would result from such a relief of the parental necessities

as the warm-hearted but indiscreet writer of this friendly epistle suggested, on the one hand; and the loss of reputation, and consequently of business and connexion which might possibly, on the other hand, ensue from disregarding such an indisputable claim upon a son's purse. After a mature consideration Butler chose his course. A more ordinary person might have endeavoured to combine filial duty with economy, sending a pittance which would neither have benefited the recipient effectually, nor saved his own credit. But this was not Butler's character; he never adopted half measures. Had he lived in the town of his birth, he would have fetched his parent to his now comfortable lodging, and tended her with a solicitude which would have proved a good stock in trade for his professional advancement in many quarters. As it was, however, Butler saw no advantage in such a course, and little shame or injury to himself in the opposite. The neighbour who had written was illiterate, and in humble circumstances; Butler's position was guaranteed by the partnership deed, even had the matter reached Mr. Wearing's ears, which was wholly improbable; while, as regarded other parties, the distance of W—— from Butler's birthplace almost precluded any risk of the facts becoming known or exciting comment.

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Butler experienced some perplexity of mind as to what must be done under these circumstances. His mother had made no direct application to him for aid, and it being some year or two since her last visit to the parental roof, he had contrived, on his surmises might be, to escape the actual mention of a fact which might lead to an unpleasant discovery of some of his usual sources of support. Unhappily for this ingenious arrangement, however, his mother, more zealous than discreet, who had been at Butler's present residence and circumstances, had represented his mother's growing ailments and necessities, with a plainness which could not be denied. Butler had now to strike the balance between what he always did with great nicety and discretion, and the certain outlay of money which would result from such a relief.

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Accordingly, by return of post Butler replied to his unwelcome correspondent in a letter of cutting sarcasm and invective, which exhibited the utmost resentment at his interference, and effectually checked its repetition ; of his mother he took no notice whatever, awaiting the course of events with cool indifference.

In one respect Butler had calculated rightly. His conduct never became known to Mr. Wearing, whose powers both of mind and body, in fact, were now hardly equal to have formed a proper estimate of it ; nor did the circumstances ever transpire among his other acquaintances and connections in W——, among whom he still, for some years, passed for an estimable and industrious man of business. But Butler had miscalculated, in another particular ; the amount of the contribution from his finances which a due regard for his mother's comfort would probably have necessitated.

On receiving the letter we have described, Butler's correspondent went with it to his mother's lodging. The old lady, who, with some of the failings of her station and calling, was on the whole a worthy, warm-hearted creature, with a doting fondness for her son, of whose abilities and rising prospects she was justly proud, had at first dis-

suaded her neighbour from writing. "It would hinder Joshua in his business; besides, she was almost certain that he would come and see her before long: it was a year or two since he had been to her, and he never allowed a longer time to pass: he was a good son, very good to her." When, at last, the neighbour's letter was despatched, the poor woman, who had recently become bed-ridden, lay in a flutter of pleased excitement during the period which must elapse before it could receive its reply. "He might not be able to come at once, himself," she assured her well-intentioned friend, "but there would be a letter from him, without fail; he wrote such a beautiful hand now, although he did not often write to her; he was too busy in his office, where everyone thought so much of him. God bless the boy;" and the old lady's eyes filled with tears of thankfulness for the well-doing of the child upon whom, notwithstanding some significant indications of his hard and evil nature, she had concentrated all the thoughts and emotions of her waning life. To these unselfish reflections the poor mother, as was natural, added, during this period of happy delusion, others of a more personal nature, although still striking the same chord. As she looked round the scantily-furnished and cheerless apartment, she

experienced a kind of pained satisfaction in thinking how her son's care and the comparative affluence which he had now earned by his exertions, would speedily augment his resources and accommodations;—when, as she lay in her hard truckle bed, her imagination would picture the unaccustomed spectacle of a blazing fire in the hearth, and the table spread with a supper which had not greeted the old nurse's eyes since she had given up her attendances in the luxurious houses where she had formerly been employed. At last the expected letter came. The kind mother knew the footsteps of her visitor, and guessed his errand. "I told you he would write, I felt certain of it—yes, you have the letter, I see." And the old lady sobbed for joy at the verification of her fond predictions.

Steadily and crushingly, as the kind visitor first broke the news gently, and then, at last, after earnest entreaties, communicated the contents of the epistle itself, which he held in his hand, did the evil truth break upon the mother's heart. With a low moan, she turned her face to the wall;—it fixed in a rigid stare, and the paralysis (a slight previous attack of which had caused her present confinement) set in with fatal violence, hastened possibly by the sudden revulsion of feeling which her son's letter had

occasioned. In a few days the bell of the little church overhead tolled for its late janitress, and the pauper's funeral, one or two neighbours following the rough deal coffin and uncouth bearers, moved from the humble abode, already allotted to a new inmate, to a still narrower home in the green turfy knoll overlooking the town, which from time immemorial had received the few parishioners of St. Cuthbert's, as they were gathered to their progenitors in the dust.

Mr. Wearing's death occurred not long after the events we have just described. In his last moments he solemnly committed his son to Butler's charge, who was some years his senior. There was no lack of ceremonious observance in the partner's conduct now; to his youthful *protégée*, especially, he was profuse of kindness. The latter was frequently a guest at his table; he was entreated to spare himself all unnecessary devotion to business at this period of sorrow; anything that could divert his thoughts from painful reflection, amusement, society, genial intercourse, were placed in his way by Butler (now located in a house befitting his improved position in the business) with tact and delicate assiduity. Young Wearing, a mere boy in mind and character, gradually entered into pleasures, of which during

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experienced a kind of proud satisfaction in thinking how her son's care and the comparative affluence which he had now derived by his exertions, would speedily augment his resources and accommodations;—often, as she lay in her hard truckle bed, her imagination would picture the unaccustomed spectacle of a blazing fire in the hearth, and the table spread with a supper which had not greeted the old nurse's eyes since she had given up her attendances in the luxurious houses where she had formerly been employed. At last, the expected letter came. The fond mother knew the footstep of her visitor, and guessed his errand. "I told you he would write, I felt certain of it,—yes, you have the letter, I see." And the old lady sobbed for joy at the verification of her fond predictions.

Sternly and crushingly, as the kind visitor first broke the news gently, and then, at last, after earnest entreaties, communicated the contents of the epistle itself, which he held in his hand, did the evil truth break upon the mother's heart. With a low moan, she turned her face to the wall;—it fixed in a rigid stare, and the paralysis (a slight previous attack of which had caused her present confinement) set in, and she lay motionless. Possibly by the suddenness of the blow, the mother's letter had

occasioned. In a few days the bell of the little church overhead tolled for its late parishioner, and the pauper's funeral, one or two neighbours following the rough deal coffin and wretched bearers, moved from the humble abode, already allotted to a new inmate, to a still narrower house in the green turf knoll overlooking the town, which from time immemorial had received the few parishioners of St. Cuthbert's, as they were gathered to their progenitors in the dust.

Mr. Wearing's death occurred *not long* after the events we have just described. In his last moments he solemnly committed his son to Butler's charge, who was some years his senior. There was no lack of ceremonious observance in the partner's conduct now; to his youthful *protégé*, especially, he was profuse of kindness. The latter was frequently a guest at his table; he was entreated to spare himself all unnecessary devotion to business at this period of sorrow; anything that could divert his thoughts from painful reflection, amusement, society, genial intercourse, were placed in his way by Butler now located in a house befitting his improved position in the business, with tact and delicate assiduity. Young Wearing, a mere boy in mind and character, gradually entered into pleasures, of which during

his father's business he had had little experience, with increasing zeal. As his time became less recent, Butler led him to see still more of the world; he did not himself accompany him to the billiard table, the tavern, or the race-course; — necessary attention to business, which Wearing only too gladly left in his partner's hands, did not admit of this; but he took care to introduce him to those who more than supplied his place. His own professional application, meanwhile, was incessant: he acquired the confidence of most of the clients, and repaid it by a devotion to their interests at once able and unscrupulous.

At length, the course of dissipation on which young Wearing had entered, began to bear its fruits. He drank deep, betted deep, became reckless and profligate in character, haggard and squalid in person. His ample share of the partnership profits supplied funds which, to an inexperienced youth, appeared inexhaustible. When these fell off, Butler advanced him small sums from his own resources; at the same time he plied him with drink, arranged with his creditors, overwhelmed him with seeming kindness. Ultimately, the young man's incapacity for business became notorious; he was seldom sober, lounging all his mornings in obscure pot-houses, and

issuing forth at night to scenes of low riot and debauchery.

Butler's time was now come: he consulted one or two friends of the late Mr. Wearing on the subject, stating that a dissolution of the partnership, as they were in fact aware themselves, was now inevitable; but that as the result of this would be the total ruin of the young man, whose course of life no one more deplored than himself, he would be glad to make some arrangement by which the latter should voluntarily resign his interest, receiving either a present sum in payment, or, what Butler suggested might be more beneficial to him, a moderate annuity during his life. The friends thus referred to loudly praised Butler's generosity; he might, they were well aware, have forced his partner into a dissolution without any equivalent, in which case Butler would doubtless have carried with him the whole business connection; in fact, it was evident that young Wearing would never pursue his profession. At the same time, as Butler had made so liberal an offer, they would gladly accept it, and arrange the matter with his partner. Eventually, Wearing executed a transfer of his whole interest in the business to Butler, receiving the proposed annuity, which he only lived a few months to enjoy, his excesses

having brought on an attack of *delirium tremens* which proved fatal. A few weeks before his death, on a dusky evening, Butler met the son of his late benefactor in a narrow bye-street, adjacent to one of his haunts of low profligacy. The unhappy youth recognised him, and, in a hollow tremulous voice, asked for a small trifle in money. Butler hesitated a moment; but there was nothing to be gained or lost now; with a contemptuous jest he passed on, and finding that Wearing still obstructed his progress, and there being no one in sight, he collared him and flung the reeling tottering frame, which he had solemnly taken under his charge, to one side, where the victim lay helplessly wallowing in a foul gutter, while the author of his ruin walked calmly forwards, to contrive fresh schemes of villainy and deceit.

Butler had now sole command of the business, and prosecuted it for his own advantage ably and well. In some instances, indeed, some unscrupulous transaction, or unfair advantage, came to light; pieces of "sharp practice," which, as their recurrence became more frequent, made the respectable practitioners of the neighbourhood shake their heads. Butler, too, encouraged pettifogging in all its branches; no litigation ever lost in his hands; the

sparks of injury were dexterously fanned into a flame; charges brought, and steps taken, which were irretrievable; until the deluded gladiators of the law court would awaken from their visions of resentment and retaliation to find that their passions had all the time supplied amusement and profit to the attorney. Hence Butler gradually became involved in transactions which fully justified Cowdery's remark, and which in W—— and the immediate vicinity, although it secured him a lucrative business, made him pretty generally mistrusted, disliked, and feared. Clients at a distance, however, having less opportunity of forming an acquaintance with his character, still kept to the old office, which had been extensively known and employed among the county families; so that Butler was still able, as we have seen, to command funds to a considerable extent, there being always within the reach of a solicitor of good business a certain amount of floating capital available for investment when required.

Such was the man whom Mrs. Akehurst, feeling her own incapacity to shape her course rightly under the altered circumstances in which she now found herself, summoned to her assistance. We have forbore to give a more particular analysis of Butler's

character, because we believe the reader will have appreciated it better from the brief outline we have given of his previous life, than from any studied recapitulation. Suffice it to say, that it was a character containing most dangerous elements to any one brought within its reach, and that the influence it had already exerted upon Mrs. Akehurst was more considerable than could have been supposed in so short a time. It was the strong moulding the weak; and struggle as she might to assert the superiority of her own position, she invariably felt after each interview with Butler that his fertility in resources, his openly avowed disbelief in all the higher springs of human action, his cool *nonchalance*, above all, the utter hardihood (more based upon deliberate calculation than on mere recklessness) with which he would at any time overleap the boundaries of right and wrong and adopt any course of action, however opposed to moral or even human sanctions, which offered a reasonable prospect that the advantage would outweigh the risk and loss of character; in a word, his bold pursuit at all hazards of the ends which she equally aimed at, but with more scrupulousness as to the means; all this, Mrs. Akehurst felt, gave Butler, without his appearing to assume it, a power and hold over her, almost a right

to dictate her line of conduct, which increased the more she was brought into contact with him.

Lately, indeed, since the notification of the settlement contained in Messrs. Neill and Hetherington's first letter, Butler's manner towards his employer had considerably changed. Instead of the cringing servility of demeanour which he usually displayed where he had any interest to serve:—for nothing was more remarkable in this bad bold man than his power of assuming *any* character, bullying or fawning, coarse or refined, which might serve his ends for the time being—instead of *this* manner, which had been habitual to him at Cheveleigh, Butler had lately adopted rather a more abrupt tone. He did not, indeed, think it prudent to go too far until he had ascertained the actual contents of the settlement; still he had begun to take rather a higher tone with his client, determining, if her position under the settlement should prove what he anticipated it would, at once to provide some definite security for the funds which, as we have mentioned, he had advanced on her note of hand only, and which he could not but feel were, by this unexpected stroke of fortune, placed in sufficient jeopardy to require prompt and decisive measures.

On reaching Cheveleigh, the morning after the

fête, Butler proceeded at once to the study. Mrs. Akehurst was still there, having excused her absence from the company on the plea of indisposition. His salutation to her was rather curt and uncere-
monious; she did not observe upon it, however, but handed him the settlement, which he perused in silence. He rapidly took in the material contents of the instrument, which proved even worse than he had anticipated. From the solicitor's language, he had thought it possible that Mrs. Akehurst might have had a life interest in the property; as it was, her tenure of it could only continue for a few years, and might even terminate at an earlier period. It was indispensable that the repayment of his advances should be at once secured in any way that was now feasible, and he was rapidly running over in his mind the best course to be adopted, when Mrs. Akehurst spoke; her resentment, long pent up in her own breast, must now have a vent in some direction, and in a burst of petulance, accompanied with more than her usual profusion of sighs, lamentations, and other self-commiserations, she now reproached Butler with being the cause of her present misfortunes. "It was entirely," she said, "his fault, always recommending her to borrow fresh sums, and involving her in embarrassments of every kind;"

quite overlooking the fact, that every advance made by the attorney had been at her own pressing solicitation; and that the real source of the grief and mental distress she was then exhibiting was not the amount owed by her, as to which, indeed, she concerned herself very little, but her rage and mortification at the loss of Cheveleigh, and the inferior position in which she would now be placed.

Butler could have desired nothing better than this opening; he felt it necessary to be secured, indeed, for his advances, but in the few minutes' consideration he had given to it, he thought he saw the way of being so; while, on the other hand, the management of the Cheveleigh property, should Mrs. Akehurst, as was quite possible, continue some years longer in occupation of it, was much too good a thing to be given up. Accordingly, while his client ran on in this fashion, Butler made no attempt to stop her; he waited until she paused of her own accord, and then came in front of her chair and looked her full in the face. Butler had a remarkable power with his small deep-set eye; he could at times, when he was angry or chose to appear so, make it dilate to a remarkable size, with an expression of concentrated force which made it almost terrible to encounter. Thrice in her life did Mrs.

Akehurst see the evil glare of that eye in its dark mood; it turned upon her now for the first time, like the gaze of some baleful fire in the sky, effectually curbing the torrent of words which still seemed disposed to rise to her lips. After a short silence Butler then retorted, less angrily than he had at first intended, but still in a firm peremptory tone. He spoke of *himself* as being the real sufferer by the recent discovery; that instead of advancing his money to a person of large fortune, he had, in fact, risked it in the hands of a needy spendthrift. Such security, however, as was still possible, Mrs. Akehurst must at once give him. There was the Welsh property still untouched, (for Butler had during the last few months ascertained precisely the posture of his client's affairs in all respects); this would cover a good deal; the jointure, which had in law ceased to exist in a separate form, being of course included. In addition to this, there was the probable income of Cheveleigh for some years to come, which must be made available as a security in the best way that could be arranged, possibly by some form of insurance. This Butler would consider of, but meanwhile Mrs. Akehurst must understand that there could be no trifling in the matter; the money advanced belonged to other persons, and

Butler would be responsible for it. He regretted that Mrs. Akehurst should have adopted the childish course of blaming other people for a position of difficulty in which she had been placed entirely by her own conduct.

The tone of Mrs. Akehurst's reply, and her submissive appeal to Butler to endeavour to make the best arrangement he could for her under the circumstances, showed that he had carried matters far enough. He now resumed his more habitual manner, and, with some show of courtesy, assisted his client in comprehending some of the details of the settlement, which she had not fully understood from her previous perusal. Its provisions appeared perfectly clear and unimpeachable ; but, as Mrs. Akehurst seemed to cling to the hope, however faint, that there might still be some misapprehension or mistake about it, Butler suggested, as the last chance, that the instrument should be submitted to some eminent counsel in London, accompanied by the will and other papers necessary to show Mrs. Akehurst's legal position, and also by a "case," requesting his opinion as to her rights and interests under the circumstances. As Butler shrewdly suggested, if there should happen to exist a flaw anywhere, this mode of framing the question would give

the opportunity for its detection, and might possibly lead to some useful results, although he could not recommend Mrs. Akehurst to build any hopes upon an event so precarious.

After some further conversation Butler took his leave, promising to prepare the "case" for counsel's opinion without delay. He had, during the interview, drawn out a short agreement for the proposed security, which Mrs. Akehurst signed at his request; and, as a further preliminary to the measures which she could not but feel must now be adopted, he cautiously intimated that it would be well if Mrs. Akehurst could find some mode of abridging the present round of festivities, and relieving Cheveleigh of some of its supernumerary guests. In this he met with less opposition than he had anticipated; many of the visitors were, indeed, expected to leave Cheveleigh in a day or two, the gala on the opening of the water-works having been the culminating point of the series of entertainments which had been so long maintained within its walls. But, in addition to this, Mrs. Akehurst was now by no means unwilling to comply with Butler's suggestion, even for her own sake. Since the discovery of the fatal settlement, and especially during the last day or two, she had found the task of meeting the usual demands

of society, and preserving a cheerful and gay demeanour amid so many sources of disquietude in her own heart, almost insupportable; and she now longed ardently for a period of comparative quiet and isolation, during which she might calmly review her altered position, and ascertain what means of gratification and indulgence in her favourite pursuits still remained within her power. Especially during the period which must elapse before counsel's opinion could be received, she would have been only too glad to have dispensed with every one of the guests, who were still likely to continue at Cheveleigh a short time longer: this "opinion" was her last chance, and her anxiety and interest were concentrated upon it with even greater eagerness than they had been a few days before on the arrival of Messrs. Neill and Hetherington's despatch. In the present instance her wishes were singularly and unexpectedly gratified.

During the afternoon of the day succeeding the *fête*, Lucy had been sitting with Charles in the octagon-room as usual. He had seemed very drowsy and depressed during the morning, and she had thought it better to leave him for an hour or two's sleep, having herself some occupation which required her presence elsewhere. In the afternoon, however,

he had rallied again, and had listened, apparently with more interest and attention than he had done for some time past, to Lucy's description of the serio-comic festivities of the preceding day. She was describing with great animation the fireworks (which had in fact been of first-rate excellence), when a slight movement at the other end of the room caused her to turn from the window, where she had been standing with her face slightly averted from Charles, towards the sofa on which he was reclining. With a sudden spasm of terror, and a bitter cry, she saw that his head had fallen back on the cushion; he was alive, but insensible; breathing hard and strong, his eyes open, but with a glazed appearance in the pupil which was wholly different from their natural expression.

Medical aid soon arrived; the surgeon who had attended Charles at the time of the accident, and whose visits had not wholly discontinued, was on his way to the village, when the messenger from Cheveleigh Court met him. A glance at the sufferer enabled him to form his judgment on the case; he did not disguise it; there was no hope. "The event," he said, "had justified a surmise which he had long entertained, but which he would not communicate while there was still the possibility of improvement;

the present state of things removed all doubt. It was evident that the blow which Charles had met with in his fall from the bridge had occasioned some undiscovered, probably undiscoverable, injury in the head; this had been mitigated for the time, but without admitting of entire recovery, and had now recurred with increased violence. The poor lad might linger," the doctor added, "for some few days, but his recovery was quite hopeless. Even his restoration to consciousness was highly improbable, although not beyond the verge of possibility, as it did not appear that effusion had yet taken place."

This fresh disaster of course dispersed the stragglers who still lingered on at Cheveleigh; and by noon on the following day the old house was as quiet as if the guests who had lately thronged its halls were the unsubstantial and fleeting images of a dream. On Mrs. Akehurst's mind the occurrence seemed to make little ascertainable impression. She performed mechanically whatever duties devolved upon her in the sick-room, moving from place to place with a preoccupied air, very different from her usual noisy officiousness and bustle. At other times, she sat in her solitary chamber or Mr. Akehurst's study, in a moody abstraction, apparently wrapped in her own thoughts, and feeling little the impact of any

external circumstance. One of those changes had come over her which the observer of character will not unfrequently see in life; a sullen, sombre frame of mind, the precursor of great evils in the world of moral being, as the unnatural stillness which precedes the hurricane or the earthquake is the forerunner of its physical disorders.

CHAP. IX.

"Angel of death! I know thy errand well,
I feel the scorching blast of Azraël!"

R. LARGE.

It is a large old-fashioned chamber, with a low ceiling and long mullioned window, through which the stream of moonlight flows without interruption, excepting where some lozenge or escutcheon in the panes, enriched with the armorial bearings of the long descended owners of Cheveleigh, intercepts for a moment the clear radiance, not as an opaque substance might have done, but showing distinctly the cobalt and ruby of the old glass, behind which the bright orb gleams like a passing spirit. In one corner of the room, on a small tent bed, which by Charles's request had replaced for his own occupation the cumbrous and somewhat gloomy tester which properly belonged to it, lay the still breathing but insensible form of the present male representative of the old house. It is four days since the seizure

we have described in the last chapter, and no change has taken place in Charles's symptoms; perhaps he is rather weaker, and the attempt to convey some nourishment in a liquid form has failed, but there is as yet no marked alteration for the worse. *Improvement* is hopeless; and even Charles and Lucy's old nurse Hannah, who has been sent for to watch in the sick-room, sits in hopeless dejection hour after hour by the bedside, or moves wearily on some necessary errand, without daring even in words to convey any comforting assurance to her other child, as she calls poor Lucy (for Walter, the son who had died in infancy, had not lived long enough to come into Hannah's hands), or predict any event but that which they both instinctively feel is now inevitable. Old Hannah has been for the last forty-eight hours without repose, and Lucy has insisted on her going to lie down in an adjoining room, promising to call her in a few hours, and then retire herself for the same purpose, thus dividing the night into two watches.

When the nurse left the room, and Lucy had once again adjusted the pillow under Charles's head, and wiped from his lips the slight frothy foam which from time to time rose to them—almost the only office which the sufferer's insensible state admitted—she took her usual seat in a low chair at the bed's

head. It was a sweet, still evening, hardly cold enough to necessitate the fire which burnt in the grate; a dim light stood on the mantel-piece, but the moonlight was strong enough without its assistance for Lucy to mark every feature in the pallid face of the stricken boy, from which she hardly ever removed her gaze. The house was perfectly quiet and motionless; Mrs. Akehurst had retired to rest immediately after her last visit, some hour or two since; and the domestics, with the exception of old Hannah, had quickly followed her example. At a great distance, as far perhaps as the village, or in some outlying farm, a dog bayed at the moon, as it clomb higher and higher in the sky, but the sound was too faint to break the deep repose and solitude of the hour. Nearer at hand, the large turret clock of Cheveleigh, which was not far from Charles's room, ticked with a regular even beat, which soothed rather than disturbed the listener; but, with the above exceptions, no sound was audible, except the low murmuring of the clear fire in the grate, and the monotonous breathing of the sufferer, harder than in actual sleep, but not attended with those painful circumstances which in cases of fatal seizure often form the most distressing feature of the sick room. On the contrary, like all around, it was rather peaceful;

and as Lucy occasionally looked up (her bright eye dimmed with tears), and then returned to her usual intent gaze, she could almost have believed, but for her better knowledge, that the reason for her sorrow had disappeared, and that she saw beside her the deep tranquil repose of youth and strength. It was the first time since his attack that Lucy had been alone with her brother. She had often coveted the solitary watch by his bedside, feeling almost jealous that it should be shared even by old Hannah, but she would not, for the gratification of her own wish, interfere with any attendance of others which might be of use to Charles. Now, they were indeed alone; the two children of the dead father. Was *he* near them? was he looking down, perhaps, on the chamber of grief and suffering? could he hear her half stifled sobs; would he comfort her, as he had often done in past years, when in some well-remembered childish trouble, he had called his little playmate to his side, and engaged her attention upon other objects until the tears ceased to course down her cheek, and she laughed again in spite of herself?

Unconsciously Lucy averted her gaze from the bed, and remained sitting for some time in an upright posture, musing on the train of thoughts, partly sorrowful and partly happy, which had been thus

suggested to her, but with a feeling of depression on her mind which threw an atmosphere of gloom even over the brightest recollections of former times. In Lucy's present posture she was fronting the long mullioned window of which we have spoken; her eye rested upon it, and seemed to explore the deep vault beyond and the silver moonlight which bathed every object in a flood of brightness, as if she discovered in them the avenues and inlets of the unseen world. While thus occupied, Lucy was inexpressibly startled by the appearance of a face slowly rising above the window-sill, and peering in, cautiously but intently, at one of the lower panes. There was nothing ferocious or appalling in the countenance itself; on the contrary, it was a youthful face, with a pleasant honest expression, very unlike what would be expected from a person approaching the house with sinister intentions, although at the present time it was overclouded with an expression of intense sadness and dejection. What added to the strangeness of this apparition was, that Lucy could not help imagining that the features of the intruder bore a singular resemblance (probably, she thought, on farther reflection, the effect of some trick of the senses acting on a mind exhausted and overstrained by her long and anxious vigil) to the very two

persons with whom her thoughts had lately been principally occupied, her father and Charles himself. To the latter especially, although the face had an older look, and there were some differences of expression, the likeness appeared to Lucy, in the intent and troubled gaze which she now threw towards the window, unaccountably striking. It was Charles, indeed, such as he had appeared *before* his illness, but this did not diminish the vividness of the image. On the contrary, it seemed as if the brother she had once known, in his fullness of health and strength, were now gazing in with that mournful and dejected aspect at the wasted shadow of himself stretched on the low pallet bed by her side.

Lucy, however, had not much time to observe the unexpected appearance thus presented to her. Her first impulse, on perceiving it, was to scream violently; but the thought of Charles's state immediately repressed this, and almost in the same instant, the visitor who had so alarmingly intruded on the solitude of the sick chamber, disappeared from the window. His gaze seemed to have been travelling round the room in search of some object, and on reaching Charles's bed, it had rested there for a few moments with a singular expression of doubt and anxiety; but immediately afterwards, encountering

Lucy's form, which it appeared not to have seen at first, it hastily withdrew, leaving the moonlight to pour in at the window in an unbroken stream as before. Lucy hesitated for some minutes as to the course she should adopt; the face, although wholly unknown to her, was not, as we have said, one that would have caused alarm, but for the unusual manner of its appearance; and she was very unwilling to disturb old Hannah, who stood much in need of rest: at the same time, she thought it hardly right to expose the house to some danger which might be impending, without communicating the circumstance which had occurred, and which might put its inmates on the alert. Ultimately, after a hurried glance at Charles, Lucy decided on going to the nurse's room, and requesting her to awake some of the other servants. She accordingly moved lightly to the door, and was on the point of quitting the room, when her steps were arrested by a circumstance which at once dispelled every other consideration. In the stillness of that solemn hour Charles unexpectedly spoke. He had slightly moved from his former position, and was now turned with his face towards the chair on which Lucy had been sitting; he spoke in his natural voice, but very low, although the tones, aided, perhaps, by the absence of all other

sounds, and the solitude of the sick chamber, appeared unusually distinct and penetrating; it was like a voice from the recesses of the grave. Lucy had flown to the bed almost before he commenced speaking; his slight movement in turning round had, in fact, attracted her attention. She now knelt by Charles's side, gazing intently in his face; the eyes were opened rather unnaturally wide, and he continued speaking in the same low measured tone.

"You were telling me something, Lucy dear; what was it? Something about those people. Ah! I always forget now; my head, Lucy, my head is very bad; so very bad, Lucy dear. Come nearer to me, Lucy dearest; where are you, I want to see you?"

"Here I am, Charles, close by your side. Do you not see me, Charley?"

"No, it is dark; so very dark. Oh! how black it is all round; what makes it so dark to-night, Lucy?"

"Oh; it is not dark; it is a very bright moonlight night indeed; do you not see it, Charles? do you not see me now? I am touching you quite close." And Lucy sobbed bitterly, in spite of herself, for the truth broke upon her, that to the dark, expressive eyes which had always looked upon her with so much pride and fondness, her own form, and, the

light and glory of all external things, must now, even if life were spared, be for ever a void blank. She felt it necessary to regain her self-command, and was anxious besides that the alteration in Charles's state should be at once communicated to her mother, and the surgeon sent for, as he had directed in the event of any change taking place. Accordingly, she rose from the bedside, gently withdrawing her hand from Charles's, which she had taken when he last spoke; but he detained her by a slight pressure, and spoke again.

“Do not leave me, Lucy dearest, and do not cry so sadly; my head is very bad, but it will soon be over. And, Lucy, I have some things I want to tell you, if I could think of them; two things. I have been trying to think of them for several hours, but it seemed as if there was a great bar of something lying across my head which I could not move; but I can think better now.”

“Oh, Charley dear, you must not talk more now, indeed you must not; you must try and keep quiet until Mr. Hargrave comes, and I will sit by you, and then if you can get some sleep, you will be able to talk better afterwards.”

“I *must* say it now Lucy, or it will never be said. I know what the first thing is, well; I have often

wanted to tell it you, but I fancy I was ashamed. Lucy, it was not an accident my falling into the water that day."

"Not an accident!" Lucy exclaimed in some surprise.

"No; at least my fall against the bridge was not an accident. I met another boy there, I do not know who he was, but he looked as if he worked at one of the farms. I behaved very ill to him, and insulted him; he did not get angry at first, not until I struck him with my whip, and then he turned upon me fiercely, saying something I could not quite understand. In fact I had no time, for he was much stronger than I was, although he looked smaller; and when I struck him, he collared me and flung me against the side of the bridge. I felt the rail breaking, and that I was falling into the stream; but I do not recollect touching the water, or anything afterwards until what I am going to tell you. I found myself, I do not know how long afterwards it was, lying on a kind of bank, out of the water, although I was drenched through and through, my clothes hanging upon me like lead; and almost immediately afterwards I felt very sick indeed, and such a dreadful swimming and faintness, that I was sure it must be death. When I first woke up, what ran through my mind was a feeling of violent anger—

quite fury, against the boy who had thrown me down; I could not brook the disgrace of it, and I am certain that if I had had the power I should have taken his life then, for I felt quite like a murderer. But when, the minute afterwards, it seemed to me that I was dying, all this passed away, and I saw how wicked and wrong I had been throughout, and I thought of many other wicked and bad things I had done in my life, and how proud and passionate I had often been; and I wished I could have seen the boy, to ask his forgiveness. It seemed to me as if my wish was to be granted; for I am quite sure at that moment I heard his voice close to me; he said something, I cannot recollect what, in a loud voice, almost a cry, and then it seemed to me he ran away from the place. I lifted my head, and think I caught a sight of him at some distance, but I was too ill, and suppose I fainted again, for I recollect nothing more, until I was in Chaplin's Farm with Mr. Cowdery.

"I had time to think over what I should do before I reached home. There was something I felt at the time, and often have felt since, which seemed to tell me that I should not get over the accident; and I determined never to let any one know excepting you, Lucy, what had really happened, for fear they might do something to the boy; and I know that it was

entirely my own fault from first to last; *he* behaved as well as possible. Indeed, I have always fancied, when I came to think it over, that he must have saved my life in some way; for the river was very high at the time, and I cannot think that I could have been washed up on the bank, as they fancied, and I am sure that I could not have helped myself out in any way; for even when I woke up I was too faint to move. However, whether the boy saved me or not, I made up my mind never to say one word that might do him any harm. I have been often going to tell you this, Lu; but, as I said, I felt ashamed, and put it off. I wish I had been always as good as you are, Lucy; how papa used to love you! I have often seen him when you were looking the other way — Oh! but I have almost forgot, Lucy, that's the other thing I have to speak of; what he told me to tell you."

"*He* told you, Charles dear?" interrupted Lucy.

"Yes, when he was here yesterday afternoon; no, when was it? I don't know, it seems all night now. Oh, Lucy, my head again; it is such dreadful pain." And Charles, who appeared to have related the story of the accident with little difficulty, but whose manner had shown more incoherence during the last few sentences, paused for some minutes, trying to rally

his thoughts, and with an appearance of intense suffering in his pallid countenance. Lucy longed to rise and summon assistance, but she did not dare to move from Charles's head, which she now supported by one of her hands; the other he still held in his, and his grasp of it had now become firm and clutching, almost convulsive in its evident eagerness to detain her. At length, in a momentary cessation of the pain, he seemed to recall his faculties to the idea which had previously occupied him, and spoke again.

"Oh, yes; what papa told me to tell you, Lucy. He came up here just when he had come in from shooting, and old Nero followed him upstairs;—you will take care of poor Nero for my sake, won't you, Lucy? Well, papa put his hand on my head, and said how hot it felt, and then he walked to the door, but he turned back and said, 'I am going now, Charles, and you will join me very soon; but tell Lucy, if I do not see her, tell Lucy;—Oh, that pain again, Lucy;—what was I saying, dear; Oh, I remember;—' tell Lucy to beware of . . . of . . . of . . . ' Oh, *Lucy*, help me!" And with a groan of deep pain, the poor boy's head suddenly slid from Lucy's hand, like a dead weight, on to the pillow. One eye immediately closed; a thick glazing film spread over the other; a deep stertorous breathing, audible in almost every room of the house, commenced and

lasted for some hours. It was followed by a faint sobbing sound, the exit of the animal breath from the frame which the powers of life and sensation had already vacated to the enemy ; until, calmly at last and peacefully, the young face, now in an instant restored to its habitual expression in the period of health and strength, reposed by Lucy's on the pillow, which was bathed with her tears.

Once more, a few days afterwards, the funeral procession wound its melancholy way to the little village ; once more the throng of friends and spectators gathered round the last resting place of the successive heirs of Cheveleigh ; once more, for a second time within the twelvemonth, its gloomy portals opened to enshroud in darkness and corruption the vigorous frame and quick beating pulses, the hopes and aspirations, which had seemed too full of life and energy for the tomb.

And thus evermore, without pause or respite, does the strong share of the destroyer ride abroad over the plain ; driving its furrows hard and deep in the quivering soil ; turning up, on one side, the masses of decay, the effete and worn out vegetation that crumbled before its touch ; and on the other the fresh flowers and fair blossoms that sprang brightly to the sun and sported merrily in the summer breeze !

In the interval between Charles's death and the funeral and in her attendance upon the interment, Mrs. Akehurst's manner had little changed. There was the same gloomy abstraction, a kind of settled and morose indifference to any new source of emotion, whether painful or pleasureable, which had characterised her ever since her last interview with Butler. On her return from the ceremony, she dismissed Lucy (whose bursting heart longed too passionately for sympathy to prevent her risking even the cold rebuff which she knew, alas, was possible, and which she now in fact experienced), and shut herself up once more in the seclusion of her apartment downstairs, in the study of which we have more than once spoken. About an hour had elapsed, when her solitude was interrupted by one of the servants knocking at the door: a parcel had arrived with the word "immediate" upon it; would Mrs. Akehurst wish it brought in? "Certainly." The man withdrew, and returned with a parcel, similar in appearance, although rather bulkier, to that which had reached Cheveleigh on the afternoon of the *fête*. As Mrs. Akehurst had guessed, the present dispatch contained the papers which had been forwarded to counsel, together with his opinion upon the questions submitted to him. Butler had decided on lay-

ing the case before the then Attorney-General, who happened to be a "real property" lawyer of considerable eminence: in doing so, he had prayed for the utmost despatch, and had requested that the papers and opinion, when ready, might be forwarded direct to Mrs. Akehurst, instead of to himself, which would have been the usual course; at the same time he intimated, that his client being unacquainted with legal detail, would be greatly indebted by counsel's stating her position fully, and, as far as possible, without technical phraseology. As the opinion which was now, pursuant to these instructions, placed on Mrs. Akehurst's table, is of considerable importance to our story, we must run the risk of again trespassing upon our reader's patience, by giving it *verbatim*, at the same time requesting their *close* attention to its contents, which we trust will not be found very difficult of comprehension even by those unacquainted with the grave science of the law. The opinion was written, according to established practice, at the foot of the "case," as it is called, which had been prepared for the lawyer's opinion, and ran as follows:—

"I have perused the papers referred to in the above case, particularly the settlement of his property made by the late Mr. John Akehurst's father in 18—, and

am of opinion that the latter instrument is a valid settlement in all respects, and that there would be no possibility of contesting any of its provisions, which are in fact of a perfectly ordinary character, and offer no ground for comment or animadversion.

“I observe, however, that I am requested to advise Mrs. Akehurst as to her position generally, not only in reference to the settlement, but under the whole of the documents sent with it. Now, although it is not directly so stated in the case, I gather from some incidental expressions in it, that the parties seem to assume, that on failure of the limitations preceding that to the ‘right heirs’ of John Akehurst, a Mr. *Frederick* Akehurst, who appears to be his younger brother, would become entitled to the estates absolutely. This, however, is not the case. The limitation to the ‘right heirs of John Akehurst’ was in effect, by a well-known rule of law, an absolute gift of the property to *John Akehurst himself*, in case the preceding estates should not take effect. Accordingly, being such an interest in him, it was one which he might have disposed of in his life-time, or (should he fail to do so) by his will. Now, among the papers sent to me, I find a short will of Mr. John Akehurst, giving in unexceptionable terms the whole of his real and personal property to his widow, Mrs.

Akehurst ; and as this will bears date several years after the settlement, it follows that the interest I have mentioned, viz., that which John Akehurst took in the event of failure of his own issue, passed unreservedly under his will, and is now vested in his widow. I should hardly have thought it necessary to advert to this point, were it not that it depends upon a rule of law which, although perfectly well ascertained, is of rather a subtle character, and may easily have been overlooked; this, in fact, from the expressions I have noticed, appears to have been the case.

“Divested of technicalities, the result shortly is, that the two life estates having now dropped, *Mrs. Akehurst herself* would, upon failure, first of the male, and then of the female issue of her late husband (and assuming that the tenants in tail had died under 21, or that from some other cause the entail had not been barred), become entitled to the enjoyment of the estates as her absolute property. From what is mentioned of the circumstances of the family, this interest may possibly become of importance.”

“So,” said Mr. Butler, to whom the parcel had been forwarded at W—, on the evening of its

arrival, without, however, any note or message accompanying it; "so, it's come, has it; '*re* Akehurst.' Well! I wonder what the Attorney-General makes out of it; little enough, I expect. However, I believe my money's secure; and there will be the pickings of the estate for two or three years more, until Miss What's-her-name comes of age; that's worth having. Pity the young chap died," pursued the man of law, leisurely untying the string of the parcel while he soliloquized, and sipping occasionally a glass of whisky and water which stood before him; "pity he died: there'd have been four or five years more of it; for the old crocodile up there" (by which irreverent term Butler, who was a thorough judge of character, designated his present employer) "was not to be turned out till some one took under the entail, and the boy's turn came first. Well, here we are; 'Will;' 'Settlement;' 'Case;' Now, let's see. 'He has perused;' yes, they all say that," proceeded Butler, holding the paper in front of him, so as to bring it into a good light, and keeping up a running comment upon the Attorney-General's opinion; "'valid settlement;' 'no possibility of contesting;' no, I never thought there was; we needn't have paid you ten guineas to find *that* out, I expect. 'Requested to advise as to her

position generally;’ of course you were; that was the whole gist of the thing; what’s the good of your telling us that? Well? ‘Incidental expressions;’ ‘limitations;’ stay, *what’s* this; ‘right heirs of John Akehurst;’ ‘Mr. Frederick Akehurst;’ well, he *is* his right heir, isn’t he? Humph! you say not, Mr. Attorney; why, who is then, I should like to know, supposing the ‘issue were to fail,’ as you call it? there was never any other brother that I could hear of, and — wh . . . e . . . e . . . w,” ejaculated Butler, screwing up his mouth, as he read on, into a long shrill whistle which, however, he did not allow to pass his lips, and suspending further verbal comments until he reached the end of the next sentence or two; when he resumed, “‘passed unreservedly;’ ‘now vested in his widow?’ *that’s* it, is it? Well, I believe you’re right, Mr. Attorney; I begin to recollect something about it now, but you see we can’t be expected to be very well up in our law down in these country parts; much obliged to you for rubbing us up. Yes, it is so, no doubt; thank you, Mr. Attorney; *that’s* worth knowing, especially under existing circumstances. Now let’s look at the rest of it.” And Butler perused the opinion with an appearance of interest very different to that which he had previously shown, still con-

tinuing, however, his running comments. "Yes; just so; 'life estate dropped;' yes; 'failure of the male line'—that's the young cove, he's knocked on the head, at any rate;—yes; 'female issue;' 'under 21;' 'entail not barred;' 'absolute property;' 'some importance;' yes; *I should think so.*" And Butler, having now finished his perusal of the document, held it in his hand for some minutes, in deep meditation upon some subject apparently of a more difficult and doubtful solution than the legal point suggested by the counsel's opinion, the accuracy of which Mr. Butler seemed at once disposed to admit.

"*Just so,*" said Butler, at length, soliloquizing as before, but more in the way of clear recapitulation, than as stating the result of his recent cogitations; "*just so.* And the long and short of it is ('divested of technicalities,' as the Attorney-General says), that if the young kitten were drowned, the old cat would sup the cream! Bless me, now," pursued Mr. Butler, after a further pause, during which he added some hot water from the jug before him to the compound in the tumbler, and then, apparently finding the dilution excessive, restored the equilibrium by a compensatory addition from the whiskey-bottle; "bless me; I wonder whether the *kitten's mamma* sees it in the same light?"

The speculation thus introduced appeared to have so much interest for Mr. Butler, that he waxed extremely and unusually thoughtful upon it. Having pursued it through one tumbler of the companionable beverage before him, he mixed himself a second. At the conclusion of this the topic seemed still far from being exhausted, and Butler mechanically stretched out his hand to repeat the process. He desisted, however, and, rising from his seat, replaced the bottle of spirits in the cellaret, and advanced to the fire-place, where he stood for a considerable period,—probably an hour or two,—hardly moving, except to shift for a moment the position of his elbow on the mantel-piece, when it became constrained, but with a sinister working of the mouth, and a restless gleaming of the small, deep-set eyes from underneath the shaggy brows, which showed that the subject of his contemplations, whatever it was, was of an exciting and probably not very edifying nature. Once, Butler searched in his coat pocket for some letters, which he took out and read very carefully through and through ; weighing and noting every word, almost every stroke of the pen, as if from those mute characters he could draw the same indications which he was accustomed to derive from his intent study of the face, manner, and words of

those with whom he conversed; at times, too, he muttered a word or two to himself, but too low to be distinguished.

At length Butler seemed to have made up his mind on the subject he had been considering; the result was such as appeared to give him satisfaction. "It will do, I am sure it will do," he ejaculated once or twice; "it's bold, very bold, certainly; but, from all I've seen, *quite* safe, if it's properly managed. It will require some time, of course, and I do not yet see my way to all the details; but it's *perfectly* safe. Bless me, yes," pursued Mr. Butler, "I'm sure of it, quite sure."

And with this compendious devotional exercise, to which he was rather addicted, the worthy attorney lighted his candle from the table lamp, which he extinguished, and, proceeding up stairs, retired without further cogitation to his night's rest.

CHAP. X.

“ Then wound he the first blast upon
The bugle, loud and long :—
It was no lay of troubadour,
Or love-sick minstrel’s song ;
But the smiths beside the anvil
Who forged it, arm with arm,
Had chanted, as the horn was made,
A pagan rhymers’ charm ;
And the sounds that they had woven
In the dull and senseless gold
Dwelt like the spirit of a man
Within their unblest hold ;
It was dumb to every strain but one
That horn of elfin mould.”

ELDRIDGE.

BUTLER’S attendance at Cheveleigh Court had not been requested on the morning following the events of our last chapter, but he appeared there early in the forenoon, and found Mrs. Akehurst at liberty to see him. His manner to her was now considerably altered from that which he had adopted in the last interview we have narrated. He had then been abrupt and uncereemonious ; now, he exhibited a

studied courtesy, at times even an air of interest and kindness, singularly belied, indeed, by the watchful grey eye, which nothing seemed to escape, and the hard lines of the other features, but still plausible in itself, and frequently employed by Butler with such good effect, as actually to impress those whom he addressed, in spite of all knowledge and convictions to the contrary, with some amount of belief in his sincerity. Butler had, in fact, many of the qualities of the consummate advocate; above all, the adroitness of *insinuation*; the artifice of raising, without any direct argument, a prejudice in the hearer's mind in favour of some particular view, or (more usually) against the opposing side, which in many an important judicial proceeding has turned the scales of justice the wrong way. This assumed friendliness in Butler's manner soon began to be attended by an imperceptible advance in intimacy between Mrs. Akehurst and himself, not claimed or obtrusively brought forward on the attorney's part, but following, as a necessary consequence, from the degree in which he thus identified himself with his client's interests. And thus it gradually came to pass, that in the present and succeeding interviews Butler's tone and manner,

although, as we have said, still courteous and respectful (as far as the habitually reckless air of the man could make it so), acquired rather the familiarity of an old friend, or even relative, than the formal politeness of a mere legal adviser. The reader must pardon this somewhat dry page from the mysterious chapter of human *influence*: that fixed, but only partially understood code, under which mind acts upon mind, moulding, fashioning, re-creating; developing or extinguishing the germs of truth and goodness, elevating to angelic excellence, or stripping even of the finer instincts of humanity, unto the end of time.

"I am afraid, Madam," said Butler, when the preliminary greetings had passed, "that you have been somewhat disappointed by the Attorney-General's opinion, which I have to thank you, by the way, for sending down to me last night. I never, indeed, felt very sanguine as to the result, and I believe I said as much in our last interview. Still, one always cherishes a certain amount of hope, and I can assure you, Mrs. Akehurst, of my sincere sympathy in a misfortune which I fear we must now look upon as inevitable. You were able, I suppose, to follow the opinion, at least the main drift of it?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Akehurst, rather sullenly, "it

is plain enough. As far as I can see, there is nothing for it now but beggary and ruin."

"I hope not so bad as that," replied Butler, "although of course it is best for us to look matters in the face; in fact, there is nothing else to be done. The Attorney-General's opinion, you see, leaves us just where we were before, excepting as to this contingent interest of yours, and that is hardly worth the trouble of discussing."

"I hardly understand what you mean by 'contingent interest,'" answered Mrs. Akehurst.

"Well," said Butler, who had now unfolded the paper with the written opinion, and was running his finger down it on the table, "I believe the real property lawyers would call it 'vested,' in their phraseology, but that does not, perhaps, signify to us. I never was much acquainted with that branch of law, myself, else I should have made the same discovery the Attorney-General has done; indeed, I feel that I ought to apologise for not having done so. However, it shows the advantage of consulting wiser heads. It is wonderful how many things, Mrs. Akehurst, which you would never have dreamed of, turn up in a title or other set of papers, when once they get into counsel's hands. I have known a conveyancer pick an estate full of holes which had been

bought and sold without demur for half a century; once give them the chance, Madam, and they will cover a dozen sheets of paper with their 'requisitions and objections,' as they call them. It always reminds me of the old saying, that a fool may ask more questions in a quarter of an hour than a wise man can answer in five years. But I beg pardon, Madam, for running on so; I wanted to find the place; oh here it is."

During the above speech, Butler had allowed his finger to pause for a minute in its search down the page, and had looked up at Mrs. Akehurst, his hand still resting on the paper, and his body leaning forward, apparently forgetting the object of his quest in the desultory reflections which it had thus suggested, but really with the design of ascertaining how far his position would enable him to obtain a view of his client's face, should he be desirous of doing so, without any marked degree of observation. He slightly changed his posture, and resumed.

"I was saying, Madam, that this would properly be called, I believe, a 'vested interest,' but we need not, I think, go into that, now. The interest which I mean is, of course, that which, as the Attorney-General very clearly explains, you will now take under your late husband's will, in the event of a

failure of his issue. Perhaps, Mrs. Akehurst, I had better just state to you shortly, in still more popular language, the effect of this opinion. You see, we laid the whole of your papers before counsel, and requested his advice generally upon them. Accordingly, after confirming what I always feared would be the case, that the provisions of the settlement cannot possibly be impeached, he goes on to state what your position is under the whole circumstances. Now, by a singular rule of law (which, as I have said, I must apologise to you for not having recollected when I perused the papers myself;—as I mentioned, I have not had much experience in this branch);—it appears that if the entail created by the settlement should fail, the Cheveleigh estates, instead of going on to Mr. Frederick Akehurst, as we supposed, *come back* (if I may so call it) to your late husband. It was a future, not a present interest, it is true, but that makes no difference in the law: if I have a property which I am not to come into until the end of a hundred years, or unless some twenty people die off, still I may equally *at present* dispose of it, so that the person I sell it to shall have it when either of the events I have mentioned happens; and of course if I *give it*, either in my lifetime or by my will, it is the same thing.

Now it appears, Madam, that your husband made his will several years after this settlement, and by it gave the whole of his property, without restriction, to yourself; and as *this future interest* was part of his property, I think you will see very clearly that, by his will, it is now yours as much as it ever was his. I do not know, however," continued Butler, after a moment's pause, "that I ought to have troubled you, Mrs. Akehurst, with this lengthened explanation, because, as I have said, the interest you thus take is, after all, for practical purposes, merely of a contingent nature; not quite so much so as it was before the recent melancholy occurrence (in which I beg to assure you, Madam, of my cordial sympathy), but still depending upon an event which, I trust, we may regard as all but impossible. You see, the interest arises only 'in case the entail should fail.' Now, the person entitled under the entail, since Master Charles's death, is Miss Akehurst. Directly she is of age (which I should suppose must be in two or three years now), she will, of course, be advised by the trustees to 'bar the entail,' as we call it; the result of which will be that she will acquire the absolute property; and this future interest you have taken under your husband's will will then become wholly void, and cannot pos-

sibly, under any circumstances, take effect. So you see that the only event under which your interest can possibly become available, would be in case anything should happen to Miss Akehurst in the present interval before she attains twenty-one; and this, thank God, is a contingency which I hope we may treat as utterly unlikely to occur. I am sure that, if anything would make up for the loss of Cheveleigh, it would be the pleasure you must feel in its coming into the possession of one so accomplished and qualified to enjoy it in every respect. At any rate, Madam, I think I have shown you that we may altogether dismiss from our consideration this 'contingent' estate, as being wholly worthless, or nearly so. I do not know, indeed, how far an actuary might be able to assign any value to such an interest, *where there is only one life standing between you and the present enjoyment of the estates,*" — (Butler spoke very slowly here, and with a marked significance in his tone which very much contrasted with the words themselves, as well as with the tenor of the preceding sentences; at the same time, he allowed his eye, which had for some time past rapidly scanned his client's face at intervals, to meet her glance full; the latter immediately sunk under it) — "I do not know how this might be, but, for the present purpose,

we must treat this interest as having no existence; our position is, in fact, the same in all material respects as when I had last the pleasure of seeing you. And now, Mrs. Akehurst, I fear the first point I must refer to is the mode of providing for the security of the sums advanced by myself on your note of hand. I can assure you, my dear Madam, that, under other circumstances, I would not have troubled you with the subject, when your own position must be a matter of so much distress and anxiety; but, as I have already mentioned to you, the money belonged to other clients of my own, and it is indispensable that they should be secured."

Butler then took a seat, and in a lengthened interview entered fully with his client into a complete adjustment of her affairs. He had taken care to have the necessary legal instruments completed shortly after his last interview, and these he had now brought up with him for Mrs. Akehurst's execution. He had also in the interval fully mastered the whole details of her property, having taken with him the necessary materials for that purpose. The Welsh property, to which Mrs. Akehurst was absolutely entitled, was of course the first resorted to; it appeared that this would cover about half the amount advanced by Butler, leaving a small surplus income

available for Mrs. Akehurst's use, after paying the yearly interest of the proposed mortgages. Next came the rental of Cheveleigh during the two years and a half, or thereabouts, of Lucy's minority, her mother being entitled, as the reader will recollect, to receive the whole of the income of the estates during this period for her own benefit. Calculating the amount of this income upon the average of the last few years, and taking in the value of some of the furniture and other property of the late Mr. Akehurst's which did not follow the entail, Butler ascertained that there would be about sufficient to repay his own advances, as well as the greater part of the sums borrowed from the Jew doctor. It is true, there were two difficulties attending this part of the arrangement. The first was a merely formal one, and was easily surmounted. Mrs. Akehurst's enjoyment of Cheveleigh during the two and a half years only, was of course dependent upon her own life; it would, therefore, be necessary to effect an insurance for the amount proposed to be secured in this manner; and for this Butler had already taken the preliminary steps. The second obstacle was likely to prove more serious, and the attorney, although determined on carrying his proposition, was prepared for a considerable amount of repug-

nance to it on his client's part. To make the income of Cheveleigh available for the required purpose, it was necessary that Butler should receive the whole rents of the property during Lucy's minority ; thus leaving Mrs. Akehurst nothing but the scanty annual pittance derivable, as we have said, from the Welsh property, after paying the mortgage interest ; a sum barely competent for the support even of herself and Lucy in tolerable comfort, and of course totally inadequate to allow of her remaining at Cheveleigh. In fact, it formed part of Butler's arrangements that the latter should be let during the remainder of Mrs. Akehurst's interest in it, and he had already made inquiries which seemed to promise an eligible tenant.

It was only by a combination of adroitness and decision, which did the highest credit to his strategy, that Butler ultimately succeeded in procuring his client's consent to this arrangement, but the battle was at length won. The attorney returned to W—— with his bundle of mortgages and other securities, "signed, sealed, and delivered," under his arm ; and Mrs. Akehurst retired to rest, with the stunning consciousness that on the following morning her array of servants and retainers must be disbanded, and the fabric of display which she had built up round her for so many years, crumble into nothingness, and

be replaced by what appeared to her a life of penury and insignificance. Her only consolation under the circumstances was, that with many of her friends and acquaintances Charles's death might serve as a reason, at any rate for the present, for thus breaking up her establishment. It was natural, any one would feel, that she should experience an unwillingness to remain in the home where she had experienced so much and such poignant sorrow; and her removal to some watering-place, or (as Butler strongly urged) to the Welsh property, on which there was a good-sized house at present untenanted, would excite comparatively little surprise or observation, however abruptly carried out.

And thus, worn out with the excitement and discussion of the day, and the sobs and lamentations which had attended it, the widow of John Akehurst gradually composed herself to sleep, actually finding in the death of her own offspring some consolation for the loss of the pageant of wealth and luxury, which in her sterile soul had come to replace the instincts of nature's planting, and the emotions of gentle love.

CHAP. XI.

“ First let thy thrift explore with studious eye
The heaven's mute aspects and the changeful sky ;
How lie the lands, what qualities at birth
Distinguished soil from soil and earth from earth ;
Each varying product they refuse or bear ;—
Then yoke thy steers, and urge the patient share.”

VIRG. *Georg.* i. 50.

MR. BUTLER appeared to have strong reasons for wishing to carry out the Welsh scheme mentioned in our last chapter ; at any rate, he urged it with assiduity and success. Besides the influence he had now acquired with his client, and the dependence she necessarily felt upon him in effectuating the rather complicated arrangement of her affairs, he retained one very strong hold upon her in the amount still owing to Dr. Solomon Isaacs, who, without sharing any deeper plans which his confederate might entertain on the present occasion, had sufficient confidence in him to be guided entirely by his suggestions on the subject of their loan, and accordingly

tightened or loosened his hold upon his debtor as Butler from time to time judged expedient. The combined effect of these various sources of pressure was to make Mrs. Akehurst reasonably amenable to her attorney's directions on all important matters; and after considerable discussion and change of plans (during which the tenant Butler had had in view proposed for Cheveleigh and was accepted), it was at length settled that Mrs. Akehurst should fix her abode, at any rate for the present, at Plas Newydd, and that the removal thither should take place with as little delay as possible.

Plas Newydd (pronounced Newyth), or the "New House," was a substantial stone building, erected some four centuries before the commencement of our tale, but still retaining its name with a pertinacity worthy of the illustrious Welsh family which apprised the reader by a marginal note some half way down its pedigree, that "about this time the world was created." Plas Newydd lay in an extremely secluded valley, or rather glen, for its size and length were inconsiderable, far distant from any town or main road, and hemmed in by mountains of a rugged and barren formation. At a short distance, indeed, in a direct line across the hills, lay a river of some size, which, from the picturesque beauty of

its rocky scenery, has in these days of increased locomotion occasioned a considerable resort of artists and visitors to its banks; but the stream of the Hirnant, which flowed by Plas Newydd, made a considerable detour before joining this larger valley, and the latter had not at the period of our tale attained its present celebrity. The only other element which tended to stimulate the general dulness, as the advocates of progress would call it, of the district, was the recent opening of a slate quarry of some size, at a point about three miles down the valley in the upper part of which Plas Newydd lay. In this spot, the aggregation of quarrymen, who were collected in a small modern hamlet near the works, and the increased traffic and communication involved by the mining operations and sale of the produce, gave the valley, on a small scale, an air of business and animation. But, with these exceptions, nothing could exceed the isolation of the residence which Mrs. Akehurst and Lucy, one cold grey morning in November, exchanged for the brilliant saloons and cultivated elegance of Cheveleigh. Even Lucy, although the magnificent outline of the mountains, which she now saw for the first time, impressed her with a bounding sense of delight and pleasure to which she had been long a stranger, still

felt a kind of desolation creeping over her, as, leaving behind it the dingy hamlet of the quarrymen, the wretched vehicle, hired from a posting house at a considerable distance, and forming their present substitute for the handsome equipages of Cheveleigh, skirted a small black lake which separated the hamlet from the upper valley, and, toiling up an ascent of formidable steepness, followed the stream along the higher part of its course to their future home. Bleak, bare hills, beautiful indeed in shape, and with a varied and picturesque outline, but now looking stern and forbidding, from the loss of the foliage on their sides, and the cold neutral tints of surrounding objects, enclosed the valley or glen, now greatly contracted in width, and in one or two points hardly allowing more room than was sufficient for the road to pursue its course by the side of the stream, which brawled noisily, with a harsh, heavy murmur, over the broken rocks and other obstacles in its course. Higher up, the valley again expanded into a basin of some size, dotted with a few cottages, and showing the traces of a scant and impoverished cultivation; but at this time of the year nothing was growing, and the miserable stone enclosures and untrimmed fences rather increased the general sterility of the scene, just as the sight of an empty fireplace is more suggestive of

cold than its total absence. Above this, the road, ill-made and ill-kept, traversed some rough meadow land, and then, after threading the course of a narrow defile, emerged upon a smaller basin, at the upper extremity of which lay Plas Newydd. The house had none of the picturesque beauty of form common to English houses of the same period ; it was a long low edifice, built of the rough stone of the country, and with little, excepting its mullioned windows, in many instances decayed or stopped up, and the weather-beaten aspect of the stone, to distinguish it from erections of a more recent date. It looked cold, dreary, and commonplace. A short avenue of firs led in a straight line to the front of the house from a dilapidated gateway, of rather later date than the mansion itself, and flanked by two stone pillars, which had originally supported a corresponding number of round balls of the same material, but were now wholly denuded of one of those ornaments, which lay in broken fragments at the base of its former pedestal, while its colleague had also moved from the centre of the supporting mass, and hung in a threatening manner over the side. The gates had long since disappeared, and the drive up to the front door was overgrown with weeds and moss. On the opposite side, which faced the stream (for the house

was built on a projecting triangle of land between the road and the water), the appearance of things was less unprepossessing. A terrace-walk, overhanging the river, and ornamented with a few shrubs, ran along the front, and commanded a view up and down the valley, which at a more genial time of year would have been one of considerable beauty. A small lateral glen joined the main valley shortly above the house, winding round the base of a rocky precipice or "craig," as it is called in Welsh, and offering glimpses of a varied mountain outline in the distance. On the same side as the craig, at a short distance above it, rose a steep conical hill, bearing the familiar name of "Moel y Ddinas," the site of a fortified British town, or "Dinas," whose rude earthworks some eighteen hundred years back had probably heard the battle-cry and reddened with the blood of many a stout warrior among the quarrelsome tribes of this rude district. Still higher up, at the distance of about a mile and a half from Plas Newydd, the valley terminated abruptly in a deep ravine or cwm;—the Dall (Dathl) Cwm, or "Blind Ravine," as this was named;—a feature familiar to all Welsh travellers, where the streams, descending rapidly from the moor above, have scooped out the hillside into a steep, almost precipitous hollow, like the bowl of a spoon. This

was, in the present instance, a dark cavernous recess, scarred in various places with the mass of water and loose shale suddenly thrown upon it in the wet season, and tenanted at all times of the day by gloomy shadows from the surrounding mountains, which only at rare intervals allowed the sunlight to penetrate its seclusion. The road up the valley at this point degenerated into a mere foot-track, which, mounting rapidly by the side of the ravine, afforded a precarious passage over the moss and peat of the undulating moor, the glacier district of Wales, to the few travellers whom curiosity or business led to explore its wilds.

The interior of the house corresponded very much to the description we have attempted to give of its external features. It was not without the elements of comfort and interest, but it depended almost entirely on the circumstances of the moment, and the temper of those within its walls, whether it should assume this character, or should preserve the air of gloom and dulness, with which it would probably have impressed a visitor arriving for the first time. The mansion, which had been formerly of some importance, had been wainscoted throughout, both in the upper and lower floors, as well as in the hall, staircase, and passages, with a very dark oak, which,

although its cost must have been considerable, was a questionable addition to a residence which rather required the accessories of light and cheerfulness. The pleasantest room was the drawing-room; a long low room, on the left hand of the door entering from the terrace walk, panelled with the same sombre wood as the rest of the house, but which, by the aid of a window of tolerable dimensions at each end of the room, and with the glow of a good peat fire in the grate, was capable of looking snug and even attractive. On the opposite side of the hall a small morning chamber led into the principal apartment of the house, a dining-room, which had been added at a comparatively recent period, and was of tolerable dimensions, but ill-proportioned, cold, and cheerless. Upstairs the rooms, originally few in number, and of large size, had been subdivided many years since, probably at the time the oak panelling was erected, into a number of small chambers, separated from each other by a thin partition of the same wood, and for the most part confined and inconvenient. Enormous fireplaces, the orifice of the chimney closed with trusses of hay, yawned at the back of bedsteads; the floors, all of the same black oak, had sunk in many places, and left a gap under the partition, which swayed and shook with the wind or passing footstep; the rats

burrowed and scrambled, scratched, whimpered, fidgeted, enacted alternate passages of arms, conversaciones, dances, and calisthenic exercises of all kinds, behind the massive wainscot, with a preternatural riot and hilarity, which, close to the tympanum of one's ear, was perfectly appalling; while a legion of draughts, wholly disregarding the admonitions of the rusty vane on the roof of the adjoining stables, rushed through the house in all directions, without any attention to the wind quarter, and with a perpetual chorus of piping, whistling, creaking and groaning, which would have made a retired navigator believe himself once more on shipboard. Independently of these domestic inconveniences, there were divers evils which were common to the inhabitants of the valley generally. For instance, the river in front of the house had an awkward practice of rising above the terrace walk aforesaid, and flooding the lower rooms; in fact, it was rather desirable it should do so; for according to the common belief in the neighbourhood, when the stream had once begun to swell, it never allowed the rain to leave off until it had overflowed its banks, when, having satisfied this point of honour, it would retire peaceably within its accustomed limits. Then again, coals were an unheard of luxury in the district; to be sure, this was of less consequence, as

there was abundance of excellent peat from the tur-bary at the head of the valley; but it required some education to resist the pungent qualities of this fuel, which usually gave a stranger the sensation of taking snuff all day long. Finally, the society in the neighbourhood was of the most limited description. There was a squire about nine miles off, who was ordinarily on horseback for three months of the year, and drunk for the rest of it; at about the same distance in the opposite direction lived an old peer, who had married his cook, and was devoured by gout and mortgages; the only available neighbour was the clergyman of "Llanfihangel uwch y graig," the parish in which the quarrymen's hamlet was situated, to whose parsonage, lying, with the fine Norman church, at the upper extremity of the lake adjoining the hamlet, we may perhaps introduce the reader hereafter. Plas Newydd itself belonged to another parish, the church of which was conveniently situate some five miles off among the hills; the incumbent, when he was sober, and floods or snow did not intervene, occasionally riding over to the Plas, and performing an English service in the dining-room for the benefit of the foreigners of that race, by whom the house had in late years been mostly tenanted.

Such was the home in which, for purposes of

his own (probably not unconnected with its desolate and secluded character), and by a combination of no small adroitness and decision, Butler had succeeded in locating the late occupants of Cheveleigh, and in which we must now shortly leave the reader to picture them during the ensuing winter. As regards Mrs. Akehurst, the task will not be difficult; she was utterly, intensely wretched,—wretched, not only from the recollections of past splendour, and the withdrawal of various luxuries—(amongst others, the perfidious Mdle. Annette, who, when she saw how matters were going, had accepted office under a friend of Lady Emily Charteris)—which she had been accustomed to consider necessities, but still more from the fierce sullen mood which had swallowed up all other emotions in that gloomy breast, and now poured its tide through it, without definite aim or purpose, but ceaseless and unresisted. Side by side with this, as the winter wore on, arose another feeling, which Mrs. Akehurst would have found it difficult to explain, even to herself. Subtle and mysterious, it defied analysis; it was like some of those poisons, the essences of herbs and minerals of rare potency, which, secretly administered, day by day spread further in the veins, corrupting the pure element of the blood, and eating

into the heart and vitals, until the whole living man, articulate, moving, breathing, is transformed into a foul, gangrened mass, and expires from causes which, once admitted into the system, defy scrutiny and detection. The feeling we have referred to was an antipathy, not violent at first, but steadily increasing, slowly but inevitably creeping on; impalpable, but gaining in intensity every hour;—its object was Lucy Akehurst. As we have already intimated, Lucy had never been a favourite with her mother. The two characters were wholly uncongenial: Lucy's pursuits and tastes, her qualities of mind and heart, found no response in the bosom where they should most have looked for sympathy. Disguise it from herself as she would,—there was the constant alternative of *isolation* or *collision*. But this disunion of interest, amounting, as it did at times, almost to dislike, the dislike of an inferior nature for one higher and better than itself, and aggravated by that absence of maternal instinct—of the rearing at her own breast in infancy, the caressing hand and pitying eye in after-life—to which we have already adverted as forming part of Mrs. Akehurst's character, was very different indeed from the unanalysed but overpowering feeling which we now describe: it may have prepared the

ground, but the root which now sprang up in it came from a foreign and more noxious soil. The previous want of sympathy had subsisted as a negation only; that of which we now speak was positive, an independent external presence; as we have called it, an *antipathy*. It was in a minor degree the possession of a demoniac. Accordingly, it operated in a manner very different to the ill-humour, and implied or open censure of her favourite pursuits, which Lucy, without resenting, had for some years learned to dread. Far from being subjected to comments of this description, Lucy Akehurst was now left to occupy herself almost wholly as she pleased. For days together her mother would shut herself in her solitary chamber upstairs, rarely descending, except to meals, and sometimes not even then; busied with no employment, but brooding over the dangerous aliment of her own perturbed thoughts. Often, when the November wind swept down from the hills, roaring in the huge chimneys of the old house, darting the rain fitfully against its frail casements, and howling in the avenue of firs outside like an evil spirit, the self-torturing occupant of one lonely room overlooking the stream would sit on, hour after hour, gazing vacantly on the eddies of the whirling current, or the dark recesses

of the Dall Cwm half shrouded in mist and rain, and pouring perpetually through the sullen channels of thought the tide of impotent and evil passion. And at such times, singularly contrasting with the blind rage in which she thus indulged, but for which she could not, even to herself, assign any object, would spring up within her this mysterious aversion, definite in its object, but unexplained, at any rate at present, in its cause and character. At first, the feeling recurred at fitful intervals; it came and went, apparently without her own volition. She might have repelled it; but it was too much like the current of indifferent thoughts that sweep causelessly through the mind at all hours, to suggest the exertion, even had she desired to make it. Not being repelled, it came again and again; familiarly, repeatedly, without disguise. She could now summon it of herself; she did so, with some notion of investigating its origin; it eluded her scrutiny, but came the oftener; her summons was no longer necessary; it had become chronic, fixed, ineffaceable. But, as we have said, the feeling was too deeply seated for the petty explosions of temper which Lucy had been accustomed to undergo. In its earlier stages, it led to no outward expression; afterwards, as it became more habitual, it assumed, according to

circumstances, the form of a dislike, almost a dread, of Lucy's society; a dead silence or frigid interchange of commonplace or necessary utterances, when compelled to share it; at times, a disposition to avoid her daughter's sight, as if she feared to encounter some noxious or repulsive object. Who shall map out the narrow limits which separate monomania from crime?

The only relief Mrs. Akehurst experienced to the solitude of the long dreary winter, was in the frequent visits of Mr. Butler. At first, indeed, he came to Plas Newydd only occasionally and on matters connected with the management of the Cheveleigh property, leaving as soon as the necessary arrangements were despatched; but as the winter wore on, he appeared at shorter intervals, and not always on the pretext of business. He still adopted towards Mrs. Akehurst the same manner which we have described in the preceding chapter—courteous, kind, and even sympathising, although keenly watchful, and firm in all matters where decision was required. Butler took care, at the same time, to keep his hostess well informed on all the topics of fashionable life, which would hardly otherwise have penetrated the seclusion of her present residence; the gossip and scandal, as well of W—— and its vicinity, as of the more distinguished circles in which Mrs. Ake-

hurst had been accustomed to move, he carefully selected and stowed away in his memory, previously to each visit, to be produced, like a pedlar's wares, for the use and amusement of his entertainer. In fact Butler, although hardly qualified to shine in circles of the highest refinement, had a vein of humour and satirical observation which, with his great knowledge of character, made him, when he chose, an agreeable and even interesting companion in ordinary society; and by Mrs. Akehurst, who was accustomed to be little scrupulous as to the character or honesty of those with whom she conversed, his visits were accordingly hailed with no small satisfaction, and by her invitation, became frequent and protracted. Little did she know how closely Butler's observation followed every movement in the working of her own thoughts. In particular, he readily traced, and apparently with no small satisfaction, the antipathy to Lucy which we have described as exercising such an influence at present upon Mrs. Akehurst's mind. He did not, however, notice it, nor was it in any way referred to by herself. Towards Lucy Butler's manner continued, as it always had been, respectful and even obsequious; and yet, when he could do so without observation, he began now to institute the same close scrutiny

into *her* character and habits of thought which he had so long done with her mother. Apparently the prosecution of his researches occasioned him greater difficulty in the present instance, but on the whole, he appeared to contemplate the result with considerable satisfaction.

Meanwhile, Lucy herself (for we have a considerable affection for Plas Newydd, with all its shortcomings, and before closing this somewhat long chapter, are desirous of connecting it in the reader's mind with less gloomy associations than those which it has been our duty to detail in its earlier pages)—Lucy herself, after she had recovered in some degree from the recent sorrow of Charles's death, and the unattractive character of her first impressions of her new abode, found much to interest her in the scenes to which she had been so suddenly transplanted. The mountains, indeed, whose recesses she looked forward to threading with unspeakable delight, were at present impassable, and must continue so for some months; and although even winter could not strip them of their rugged beauty, or check the feeling of freedom with which she gazed at the bare, heathery moor which capped the Dall Cwm, and the still loftier mountain ridges in the distance; still it was in-doors at present that she must look for interest

and employment. The latter soon came in an unexpected form. Left much to herself, as we have said, Lucy soon explored every nook and corner of her new dwelling: she rambled through the numerous untenanted rooms (for the Plas was of considerable size), endeavoured to arrange some old furniture, which had been let with the house from time immemorial, to the best advantage, and eked out its shortcomings with various articles of ornament of slight bulk, which had been despatched by waggon from Cheveleigh. In the course of these researches and improvements, it was with unbounded satisfaction that Lucy discovered in a large closet, with folding doors, of what appeared to have been the best bedroom, a store of books of the most miscellaneous character, and heaped together in boundless confusion, but which promised, when the layers of accumulated dust were removed, to add largely to the resources of her now numerous unemployed hours. Upon inquiry, it turned out that the collection had been the property of a former tenant, a great scholar and traveller, as Lucy's informant stated, who had left the principal part of his library behind, on undertaking some journey in foreign parts a few years back, and had never returned to claim it. The collection fully corresponded to the reputed character of its owner. There were

Latin and Greek books, as well as others in the Oriental languages, all of which Lucy reverently dusted, and replaced in good order on the shelves. Intermixed with these were rare works of history, ancient and modern; grammars, dictionaries and text-books, comprising some of the best authors in the European languages, principally French and Italian; a sprinkling of divinity; some of the poetry and light literature of a few years back; and a large assortment of treatises and works of illustration in natural science, with numerous travels and voyages of discovery. None of the authors were of a difficult or elaborate character; on the contrary, they seemed to have been gathered together by a person well acquainted with the various subjects on which they treated, but who preferred making a popular selection in each branch to entering upon the more abstruse investigations of the student. Lucy's delight at this new acquisition was boundless. She was passionately fond of reading, although the numerous avocations of Cheveleigh, and her father's constant demand for her society, had left her little time for cultivating her taste beyond the usual branches of female education, and her own favourite study of poetry. Now she fastened with enthusiasm upon the unexpected treasures thus presented to her; and finding, after a

time, how much of the day was at her own disposal, she mapped out its hours with regularity, not attempting any profound acquisition of knowledge, but finding in her enlarged acquaintance with the wonders of physical science, the histories of remote races and times, the narratives of the stirring adventures and indomitable energy of the pioneers of discovery, and the varied beauties of the French and Italian authors (most of whom were new to her), a charm which made the day only too short for its sources of enjoyment.

Not indeed that human interests were wanting at Plas Newydd; on the contrary, Lucy had here the pleasure, which had been wanting among the more splendid retinue and ceremonial of Cheveleigh, of attaching to herself as personal friends the few domestics who composed their present small establishment. Lucy's voice and manner had an inexpressible charm for all who came near her; especially to those in an inferior station, her bright smile, her gentleness, her hearty active sympathy and habitual thought for all who required her assistance, made her the object of an attachment which seemed almost boundless; while, however freely she associated with those with whom she was thus brought in contact, there was a quiet native dignity and refinement

about her, which would have made any thing like a *liberty* impossible. The attachment which Lucy thus speedily won from the humble retainers who now composed the *ménage* at Plas Newydd, compensated much for the absence of the ministrations among the sick and necessitous at Cheveleigh to which she had been so long accustomed, but which, from the state of the roads and weather, and the generally independent character of those among whom she was now thrown, it was impossible for her, at any rate at present, to resume.

Happily indeed would the days have passed for Lucy had it not been for her mother's evident alienation, and the morose seclusion in which, excepting at the time of Butler's visits, she persisted in burying herself. Lucy, of course, did not guess the real state of her feelings; the want of sympathy and personal interest, and even the occasional expression of ill humour to herself, were unhappily not new to her. Whatever addition she suffered to these now, she attributed to her mother's grief at Charles's death, occurring so soon after her former loss; and she seemed hardly surprised, although she could have wished it otherwise, that after having known such bereavement, Mrs. Akehurst should shut herself up even from the society of her remaining child, and

obstinately refuse all attempts at consolation. Still, Lucy gave her in heart the sympathy which she was not permitted to express in words; and often did the fond, gentle-hearted girl pause by her mother's door, listening to catch the sounds of weeping which might be audible within, and breathe a prayer, warm from the heart of her now double orphanhood, for the restored peace and tranquillity of the mourner on whom such sorrow had been laid so heavily.

And thus, to mother and daughter, wore on the winter. The old year died out; the hopes and emotions of its successor emerged upon the platform of the world's history; silently and slowly, the springs wandered forth from the trammels of the crusted ice, and descended for their appointed toil upon the plain; gradually, day by day, the shadows, fleeting and mysterious, crept on towards the southern base of the ancient hills; dim and uncertain, along the pathways of human life, loomed the unpropheied events of coming time.

CHAP. XII.

"The winter's nipping blasts are gone, and on the Zephyr's wing
Comes riding, like a bridal's mirth, the bright and happy spring."

HOWARD.

THE return of spring, although it promised greatly to improve the natural aspect of affairs at Plas Newydd, and was accordingly hailed by Lucy with unbounded satisfaction, appeared to produce very little change for the better in the moody temperament and self-chosen seclusion of the other inmate of that antique mansion. On the contrary, as the days lengthened, and brighter skies and softer breezes succeeded, with some interruptions, to the rigour and darkness of the Welsh winter, Mrs. Akehurst seemed to experience an access of the perturbed emotions to which she had been for so many months a prey. This may have been partly owing to the gradual discontinuance of Butler's visits, as he alleged from the pressure of business, but which really formed part of the far-sighted and astute

scheme by which his knowledge of his client's character induced him to believe that she might be brought still more effectually within his power. It was now the middle of March, and several weeks had elapsed since Butler's last visit; an interval which, as it left Mrs. Akehurst almost entirely without communication with the world of fashion and excitement, appeared to her insupportably dull and tedious. In addition to the monotony of this period, occupied only, in her case, with the ever-chafing passions which tore her heart, while they gratified its sullen mood too much to be discarded, Mrs. Akehurst experienced a special vexation in the contrast daily presented to her between the seclusion of her present existence, and the animation and gaiety in which the corresponding period had usually been passed. This was the commencement of the London season, for which, as we have said, the establishment at Cheveleigh annually migrated to Portman Square, sorely to the discontent of John Akehurst, who grumbled and fretted, ineffectually enough, at the exchange of country scenes and pleasures, at the very time when they were most attractive, for the crowded saloons and uncongenial amusements of London life; but proportionately to the gratification of his wife, who breathed in the *coterie* which she had at such

times been accustomed to rally to her receptions as in her natural element. What an altered state of things was now before her! and this too, at the very time when the zest for these pleasures had been quickened tenfold by her enforced abstinence from their enjoyment during the previous season, for which the festivities of Cheveleigh, although offering some mitigation, had by no means compensated. And now, *just* when she might have looked forward to making up for the deprivations of the past year, the means of rejoining the magic circle which for her comprised all that was attractive in nature or human life, were snatched away from her, hopelessly, and for ever!

The poignancy of these considerations operated a considerable change in Mrs. Akehurst; for the first time they made her solitude insupportable. Chasing from her thoughts for the moment (only, perhaps, to enter with deeper hold into the settled character), the gloomy passions which were their customary aliment, the contrast of her present and past lot almost forced Mrs. Akehurst into society of some kind, where she might meet, if not with the sympathy of a congenial temperament, at least with a patient auditor of her distresses. Her repugnance to Lucy, now rooted and habitual, made her as averse as ever

to any intercourse beyond that of the most ordinary and routine character; indeed, Lucy's nature, although she would have listened patiently and kindly to the recital, would, Mrs. Akehurst instinctively felt, be almost incapable of comprehending the peculiar grievances she had to detail. She was, accordingly, led to carry into effect a plan which for some weeks past had been maturing in her mind, and that was, to send an invitation (which was accepted) to Aunt Witherby.

The worthy lady to whom this name belonged was, if intellectual qualities were abstracted, one of the most perfect of human creatures. Although always called Aunt by the Akehurst family, she did not in reality stand in this relation to them; in fact the connection was not that of blood at all. Mr. John Akehurst's mother had been married twice, the first time being to a widower, Mr. Spellman; Aunt Witherby, then Margaret Spellman, was the only daughter of this gentleman. On her father's death, his widow, who had no family of her own, had treated Margaret with the affection she would have shown to her own child; and when a few years afterwards she was again married to Mr. Akehurst senior, Margaret was received as one of the family, and took up her residence at Cheveleigh. Margaret

had derived from her father a small independence, which was lessened rather than increased by her union with Mr. Witherby, a medical man in London, whom ill health, and a practice never large, and declining rapidly as he became less able to satisfy its requirements, compelled to trespass more than he could have wished upon his wife's limited means. It was perhaps fortunate that there were no children of this union. When Mr. Witherby's death occurred, which was not many years after his marriage, his widow removed to one of the midland counties, where part of her father's family still resided. The scanty pittance which she still retained was not sufficient to maintain her in comfort, hardly even to supply the bare necessities of life; and she was accordingly well content to find a home, for longer or smaller periods, as the case might be, in different families, where the assistance rendered by one so useful in all domestic matters, and especially qualified by her never-failing activity, kindness, and good temper, to cheer the solitude or alleviate the sufferings of grief or sickness, was considered an equivalent for the expense of her subsistence. Indeed, never was there a more popular visitor in any house than Mrs. Witherby. Her disposition seemed wholly without gall; nothing put her out,

nothing irritated her ; she would listen by the hour together to the wrongs, hopes, anxieties, and griefs, actual or imaginary, of every one who chose to make her their confidant ; the most prosy and tedious recital never seemed to weary her. For the young she was fertile in excuses, bearing the practical jokes which were often put upon her, with the patience of a martyr, and laughing the loudest when they were discovered ; while for the more serious errors and frailties of advanced life she would either devise some ingenious palliation, or more commonly wholly deny their existence, and boldly ascribe them to mistake, or unintentional prejudice. Indeed, it may be doubted whether Aunt Witherby seriously in her inward heart, believed in the possibility of any body being wicked or depraved at all ; it was the very last solution she could have resorted to for any outward combination of events, however inexplicable upon any other theory. It must be confessed, indeed, that to compensate for these good qualities nature had not, as we have intimated, gifted Mrs. Witherby with very brilliant intellectual faculties. When nothing occurred to require her active interference, it was inconceivable how she could sit on, hour after hour, darning or knitting, with an absorption in the process, and an absence of

any collateral mental aliment, as complete and entire as if these avocations had constituted the final cause of human existence; while the unfortunate visitor who might happen to take Mrs. Witherby down to dinner, or attempt to engage her in general conversation at an evening party, certainly could not fail to discover that he had undertaken a most serious task; it was like the sensations one can suppose oneself to experience in attempting to plough a very hard stiff marl. However, the good Aunt was an excellent sample of humanity for all her intellectual shortcomings, and in spite too of another still more serious defect, which consisted in her being a most inveterate *blunderer*. Numerous and indescribable were the misadventures to which Mrs. Witherby's genius for *contretemps* gave rise. From the most amiable motives she was always saying and doing the wrong thing at the wrong time. Her mistakes never wounded, like Mrs. Akehurst's suggestions and inuendoes, for they were the effects, not of a calculating though petty malignity, but of the most genial good-nature; still they led to perplexities innumerable; and no one was more surprised than the good lady herself when she found that her exertions issued in a result precisely the opposite to that which she had intended. Not that Mrs. Witherby's

blunders were always of a calamitous tendency; on the contrary, they often brought about very happy consequences. If on the one hand she sometimes raised a titter at the expense of a disappointed suitor, yet on the other she was the best person in the world, by some innocently explicit question, or some stratagem, as ingeniously arranged for its purpose as if it had not been wholly unpremeditated, to precipitate matters between those who were beating about the bush in the debateable ground of unavowed love; while amongst the youngsters, Aunt Witherby was almost notorious for an amiable habit of deserting her post, like Scott's Knight of the Leopard, at the precise moment when such a dereliction of duty, entirely unintentional on the good lady's part, afforded a convenient opportunity for the malpractices against which she had been all day mounting guard.

Aunt Witherby's arrival at Plas Newydd was a source of no small pleasure to Lucy, although her society was almost monopolised by Mrs. Akehurst, who, closeted with her by the hour together, poured into her patient ear the lamentations upon her present fallen and dejected condition which had hitherto been confined to her own breast. Of course it was only the external self to the contemplation of

which her visitor was thus admitted. To the latter, indeed, the dark passions which reigned in Mrs. Akehurst's heart would have been wholly unintelligible; if any faint glimpses of them presented themselves, they glanced off from the surface of a mind so devoid of asperities like the shaft from the polished rock. The only circumstance that at all arrested Aunt Witherby's attention was the very little intercourse which seemed to exist between Lucy and her mother. That there was some excellent reason for this the good lady never doubted; still, she thought that the result was undesirable; and accordingly, one March afternoon, about a fortnight after her arrival, while Lucy was busied with her occupations elsewhere, the worthy lady took advantage of a pause in Mrs. Akehurst's lengthened harangues, to introduce (a rare occurrence with Aunt Witherby) a topic of her own, on which, in fact, she had been secretly cogitating for some days past, with the view of bringing about a more happy posture of affairs in the particular above referred to.

"What a dear, charming girl Lucy is," observed Mrs. Witherby; "and so sensible and well-informed. Instead of reading all that trash from circulating libraries which one sees in most young lady's hands now-a-days, I have noticed her several times since

I have been here, quite interested in books which I am sure I never heard of; and so well as she knows her French and Italian too! I have never read a word of my French, I am sure, since I left school. How very fond you must be of her." Finding that her hearer made no response, Aunt Witherby proceeded with a subject so interesting to the maternal heart. "And nothing can be more beautiful than her conduct, to you and every one else in the house. I often see her watching you, to see if you are going to speak, or want her for any thing; and she always seems so glad to be with you, and so disappointed if you do not send for her upstairs. As to the servants, they all doat upon her; it was only yesterday I heard that old man, Jenkin, who looks after the pony, say to one of the maids, in his Welsh brogue, 'Deed iä sur, and Miss Lucy's an angel, whatever the t'other of them may be;' Oh! no, I didn't mean that," continued Aunt Witherby, suddenly reddening, and recovering herself from a dead pause, occasioned by the uncomfortable conviction which, for the first time, flashed across her mind, that by "the t'other of them," old Jenkin *might* have designated Mrs. Akehurst; "what the man said must have been, I think, 'whoever may be the other.'"

Mrs. Akehurst did not discuss the probabilities of

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the conjectural emendation thus suggested, and to which Aunt Witherby reconciled herself as a kind of pious fraud. For a moment, indeed, the old livid pallor and fixed gaze of her solitary musings returned, and she might possibly have been unable to forbear interrupting by some angry remark the theme of Lucy's praises, on which her visitor, well satisfied (in spite of some misgivings as to the detection of her recent blunder) with the happy effects she believed herself to be producing, was preparing to dilate at greater length, when the arrival of the post with a letter for Mrs. Akehurst broke off the conversation. The postal arrangements at Plas Newydd were rather precarious and uncertain, and the letter, which bore the W—— postmark, had been despatched several days previously. It was a lawyer-like epistle in its character, although not in Butler's writing, and Mrs. Akehurst occupied some minute or two, before breaking the seal, in speculation as to its probable contents. When she ultimately perused them, it was with an exclamation, almost a cry of delight, which so startled Mrs. Witherby, as to lose her hopelessly the results of the last quarter of an hour's occupation with her knitting needles. The letter proved to be from Mr. Strangways, the solicitor at W—— whom we have mentioned as having been employed by Mr.

John Akehurst in the general management of his property. With that brevity which is the most desirable companion of good news, it informed Mrs. Akehurst, that owing to a recent death, a sum of one thousand two hundred pounds, to which her late husband was entitled under the will of a distant relative, had now fallen into possession, and was ready to be paid. Mr. Strangways understood that Mrs. Akehurst was sole legatee under her husband's will; it would be necessary, of course, that the probate of this should be produced to the trustees of the fund, for whom he acted; but as soon as this was done, there would be no delay in the amount being at once paid over to her account.

Mrs. Akehurst's rapture at this stroke of good fortune was unbounded, and was shared in by Mrs. Witherby as cordially as if the sum in question would not have made herself independent and prosperous for life, had the bequest fallen to her lot. To Mrs. Akehurst it opened out a widely different prospect; the opportunity of returning, for one season at least, to the scene of gaiety from which her limited finances appeared previously to exclude her. There were but two possible difficulties in the way; the necessity of disposing of Lucy in the meantime (for it formed no part of Mrs. Akehurst's

plans to take the latter up to town with her), and the fear that Butler, with whom the probate of Mr. Akehurst's will was deposited, and who must therefore be apprised of the circumstance, might endeavour to overrule the scheme; for Mrs. Akehurst had come to look upon him as an adviser whom she rather dreaded, and who, she thought, might probably disapprove of an arrangement which she could not but be sensible would squander in frivolity and dissipation the funds which would have gone a long way to free her from her embarrassments. Both these sources of apprehension however proved to be groundless. As regarded the former, Mrs. Witherby gladly consented to remain on at Plas Newydd, and act as *chaperon* and protectress to Lucy, to whom she was cordially attached; while Butler, in an answer received a few days later, far from withholding his sanction from the course proposed by Mrs. Akehurst, expressed himself delighted with his client's good fortune, and anticipated the utmost benefit to her from a change of place and scene, after the monotony and confinement of the last few months. In fact, if Mrs. Akehurst could have seen the worthy attorney when her letter reached him, she would have discovered that she had no cause to apprehend his interference. It was *precisely the*

result Butler had desired to produce by Mrs. Akehurst's removal to the Welsh valley. He had calculated that the rebound of feeling, from her secluded and monotonous existence there, would lead her, could she only be brought up to town, into a course of reckless expenditure, which would place her still more effectually in his power; and at the time her letter reached him, he had actually been computing, whether, by screwing some further sums out of the rents, or possibly even by an additional advance out of his own funds, he might not secure this important link in his combinations. So pleased was Mr. Butler with the opportune course of events in this respect, that he actually committed the boyish extravagance of tossing up his hat, which stood near him, to the ceiling. Recovering it again, with his favourite ejaculation of "Bless me," as he found its gloss and beauty rather impaired by the feat, he then sate himself down to work out in good earnest the future moves of the daring game of skill in which fortune had so unexpectedly befriended him.

CHAP. XIII.

"Ah! who that ever sinned beyond despair
Saw the heart's promptings all at once laid bare."

MACKENZIE.

WE must now, for the next chapter or two, dismiss Lucy and Plas Newydd, and request our reader's attendance in the huge metropolis, now just rallying from its periodical simoom of March dust, and refreshed with the exhalations of reeking sewers and pestilential gullies evoked by the frequent showers of April; in other words, just progressing towards the culminating point of "the season." Mrs. Akehurst had engaged apartments in Brook Street. These were very different of course to the splendour of the former establishment in Portman Square, but still such as were quite compatible with the *entrée* into fashionable life; elegant, although small; commodious, and well-furnished. An English *femme de chambre*, pert and insolent enough, but well qualified to assist in the mysteries of the toilette, had been

hired permanently to supply the place of the faithless Annette ; while a neat equipage, graced once more by the appendage of a liveried footman, enabled Mrs. Akehurst to enjoy the fresh air, and play her part in the brilliant pageant of the parks. To be sure, it was *not quite* the real thing. The bows and civilities exchanged with her were somehow in many instances more frigid than those which had formerly greeted her appearance in the mart of fashion ; in other cases, Mrs. Akehurst detected a half smile of pity or contempt on the face which the moment before had been directed towards her with the aspect of interest and warmth ; and once, as the carriage of a wealthy baronet drove slowly away in an opposite direction to her own, she distinctly caught the words—the baronet's lady was a loud talker, and her eldest daughter, whom she was addressing, reclined in the opposite corner of the carriage—"Been living in some out-of-the-way dungeon in Wales, they say, to make up a purse for the London season !" To console herself for these half-expressed slights and inuendoes, Mrs. Akehurst projected a series of entertainments. Grand dinners were out of the question ; dancing must have commenced in the entrance passage (dignified with the name of "the hall"), and been pursued, like the recreations of the

treadmill, up and down stairs; but *soirées*, *petits soupers*, and similar inventions for consuming worthless tea and negus, and still more worthless time, were within the sphere of her present location, and cards were issued accordingly. The result proved more mortifying even than the drives in the park. There was no difficulty indeed in rallying to these assemblies a sufficient sprinkling of the small fry of former *coteries*; the hangers on and satellites of fashion, whom we have depicted in a previous chapter, and who were glad enough to undertake the tedium of an evening party for the reversion of lobster salad and bottled porter which might be expected at the end of it. But visitors of a higher grade became suddenly fertile in excuses and inevitabilities of absence. Never, in any corresponding period of the year, were colds more rife, unexpected friends from the country more exacting, orders for first-rate concerts more lavishly bestowed, or the demise of provincial or colonial aunts and cousins more general and afflicting, than in that which witnessed Mrs. Akehurst's second and less successful *début* upon the stage of fashionable life. Baffled and exhausted, she withdrew into the more exoteric circle of morning calls. At first, her neat, rather stylish-looking chariot, proved the passport for an

unquestioned admission. The servants had no instructions; aristocratic and even *élite* mansions appeared as accessible as ever; their occupants, reclining amid the artificial odours and costly frippery of their palatial saloons, exhibited, according to their respective temperaments, no access of frigidity or diminution of enthusiasm and endearments. But gradually a remarkable falling off began to be observable in the domestic habits of those on whom Mrs. Akehurst inflicted, rather mercilessly as other resources failed, the distinction of these visits. Even her "very dear" and familiar friends became unaccountably erratic at such times; in one or two instances,—but Mrs. Akehurst did not see *that* — a dramatic performance, "*ohne Worte*," was enacted between the lacquey at the hall-door (who had received such private instructions as, "Whenever that lady calls, Thomas, Miss Somerset and myself are not at home") and the graceful retainer behind her own chariot, who responded to the telegraphic signal conveyed by his fellow professor placing his right forefinger vertically upon his nose, by a corresponding application of his own left digit to the same organ. Altogether, the result of the present campaign to Mrs. Akehurst was intensely mortifying; and her ill-success derived no small aggravation from the

fact that the sum which had been devoted to this laudable purpose was melting away with frightful rapidity; in fact, the mere outfit, if we may so term it, requisite for taking the field with any prospect of a fortunate result had drawn at the mere commencement several hundreds from the fund.

At length, one afternoon in the early part of May, Mrs. Akehurst decided on making a grand final experiment. Things had been getting from bad to worse. Symptoms of disaffection had shown themselves even among her more devoted adherents, who, as the season wore on, and superior attractions offered in other quarters, began gradually to withdraw from her parties. The denials at the doors of the better class of her acquaintance, for whom vulgar gossip and selfish garrulity were very different things in Brook Street and in Portman Square, became general and repeated; while the exhaustion of the fund upon which even this feeble and ineffectual attempt to regain her former position had depended, was now complete, and the handsome balance which had at first figured in her banker's book had for a week or two stood at an amount on which she could not draw without closing the account. Indeed, Mrs. Akehurst had again begun to feel the pressure for ready money which had com-

menced at Cheveleigh, but which the trifling cost of the establishment at Plas Newydd, conducted under Butler's strict surveillance, and, in fact, offering no opportunities of extravagance, had, since her removal to Wales, prevented her experiencing. Her position, however, now, was very different from what it had been when Butler and his Jew friend so obligingly came to her help at Cheveleigh. No succours of this kind were at present available; in fact, Butler was absent from town, having purposely allowed his client to "have her fling" (as he expressed it) unmolested; and, without his assistance, she saw no mode of procuring the funds for current expenses, which the exhaustion of the legacy had made necessary. She now, therefore, adopted the other alternative, from which she had hitherto shrunk, of incurring *tradesmen's bills*. It was not without considerable compunction, almost attended with a feeling of criminality, that Mrs. Akehurst embarked on a course which, as we have intimated in a previous chapter, was so entirely foreign to her previous habits, and to the universal and most excellent rule maintained by her husband in all his transactions, and hitherto, from the force of custom, by herself. So strongly did this habitual feeling operate, that Mrs. Akehurst experienced a sensation akin to

real shame, as if she were degrading herself in the eyes of the very shop-boys who served her, when she first desired purchases to be placed "to her account," for which she had hitherto been accustomed to pay in ready money. This repugnance, however, very quickly wore off; the timidity, almost amounting to superstition,—would that there were many such in life,—which had hitherto restrained her from ordering articles for which she had not the means of paying, made the recoil more violent when its restraints were once disregarded; and Mrs. Akehurst entered upon the familiar down-hill career of credit with the avidity of a spendthrift of eighteen in his second term at the University. From the tradesmen whom she honoured with her patronage she experienced no difficulty; the practice is, of course, the every-day rule at the West-end, even had the previous credit of the lady who went shopping in a stylish equipage with liveries been less unexceptionable than it was; and Mrs. Akehurst, revelling in the fatal facility of acquisition, and shutting her eyes to future reckonings, found luxuries and costly gewgaws still more attainable without money than they had appeared to be with it. Still, however, the old habits had been too firmly rooted to prevent the recurrence at times of a

vague feeling of uneasiness ; and, besides, there were some purposes for which ready money was indispensable. The few remaining pounds at the bankers, which Mrs. Akehurst drew with a heavy heart, melted away at *vingt-un* on the same evening ; this left her literally with an empty purse ; meanwhile, as she was only too well aware, the bill for the apartments and other domestic items had been unpaid for some week or two. The mistress of the house was an elderly lady, the daughter of a clergyman ; she was in weak health, and, having invested her scanty patrimony in the purchase of furniture of a suitable style, found it difficult enough, with all shifts, to eke out a livelihood, after defraying the exorbitant house-rent and prices of the West-end. On the day preceding that to the occurrences of which we are about to invite the reader's attention, this lady had, in a courteous note, with many apologies for her intrusion, requested Mrs. Akehurst's obliging settlement of the account ; adding, that she should esteem it a favour if it could in future be discharged weekly, as had been stipulated when the rooms were hired ; an intimation which, the season being at its height, and the apartments deservedly popular, Mrs. Akehurst was aware could not be disregarded. An immediate supply was

therefore indispensable. As no other means of procuring it seemed to offer, Mrs. Akehurst, with intense chagrin, towards dusk on the day in which she had received this missive, had descended to a still lower stage in the social scale, and, driving to her jeweller's, deposited her favourite diamonds, which happened to be most available for the purpose, in pawn, for an amount large enough to cover this demand and others of an equally pressing nature.

Accordingly, it was in no very benignant mood that on the following afternoon, Mrs. Akehurst, determined, as we have said, to bring matters between herself and her quondam friends as it were to a crisis, ordered her carriage, and drove out in spite of a drizzling rain on a series of morning calls. Her first visit was to a house where she had hitherto still preserved the free *entrée*, that of Lady Emily Charteris. On the present day, however, it perversely happened that Lady Emily, — a tolerably good-natured woman, who would not have inflicted pain for its own sake, but certainly would not have put herself out of the way to avoid doing so, and who had latterly become somewhat *gênée* by her friend's visits, the advantage of which, at present, was all on one side,—had been, during the last hour or two, anxiously expecting an arrival of no small import-

ance. This was the visit of a "professional person" of eminence, who was to act as arbitrator in the nice and important questions connected with the price to be allowed by her Ladyship's maid for the purchase of her last year's dresses; a transaction very usual, it is true, in fashionable circles, and reflecting great credit on the originality of idea involved in it, but at the same time embracing points of such extreme delicacy, and so momentous to the principal party concerned, (the splendour of whose reappearance for the spring, unlike that of the flowers of the field, depended mainly on the success of the bargain that could be made for the cast-off apparel of the preceding season), as to render the intervention of a third party highly judicious and convenient. The wetness of the afternoon had appeared to Lady Emily quite a providential arrangement in her favour for carrying out this intricate and strictly private negotiation without interruption; and it was accordingly with considerable vexation that, by a hasty glance from the drawing-room window, she ascertained that the sound of carriage wheels and double double-knock which succeeded it, proceeded, not from the showy equipage of her expected visitor, but from that of her dear friend Mrs. Akehurst, whose various topics of conversation were seldom exhausted under an hour

or two. Lady Emily was in time, by a rapid despatch down stairs of her expected customer, who was equally interested with herself in a speedy adjustment of the bargain, to instruct the porter that she was not "at home"; but she had not been in time, notwithstanding her hasty retreat from the window, to prevent Mrs. Akehurst, whose eye had now come to watch for such occurrences with the keenness of jealousy and suspicion, from receiving the unmistakable evidence of her own senses to the contrary. Levelling at her treacherous friend what sounded as much like an imprecation as fair lips can be supposed to frame, Mrs. Akehurst ordered the carriage to drive on. She had better have remained in Brook Street. Everywhere she encountered disappointment, vexation,—almost insult. It seemed as if there was a general confederacy of mankind to mortify and degrade her; as if, on this particular day, she had been doomed to receive the sentence which should finally exclude her from the world of fashion and display, beyond which she hoped for, knew of, no other. The continued rain made it impossible that any one of those on whom she called should be out; the uniform tenor of the replies to her footman's double knock (like the traveller's answer to the person who expressed some scepticism as to his narratives), without at all asserting

that it was possible, established it as *the fact* that none of them were at home. There was one solitary exception; it lay, not in the more select regions of fashion, but as far east as Bedford Row, where Mrs. Johnson, the wife of the W—— banker, had been for some weeks on a visit to a friend. Happening to hear of Mrs. Akehurst's arrival in town, the good lady, who honoured and respected the family name whoever bore it, had called in Brook Street and left her card. The visit had not yet been returned; but Mrs. Akehurst, who, in her desertion, began to feel the craving for human society which Robinson Crusoe experienced after his solitary sojourn in the desert island, actually ordered her carriage to drive to those unwonted regions, and was admitted to the drawing-room, where Mrs. Johnson and her friend sat working; the latter, finding that the visitor was an old acquaintance of her guest, after a few minutes' general conversation, politely withdrew. Mrs. Johnson was a ruddy-faced, good-natured, slightly provincial, and not over-refined dame. She noticed the extreme pallor of her visitor's face, which the suppressed rage occasioned by the repeated slights and mortifications of the afternoon's drive had invested with almost a livid hue, and partly guessing the cause, for the posture of Mrs. Akehurst's

affairs (not, indeed, the circumstances of the Cheveleigh settlement, but her personal embarrassments), had, in spite of her hopes to the contrary, become pretty generally known, she commented upon it with more good-will than discretion.

“ Ah ! I see, Ma’am, you’re vexed to-day ; I dare say it’s about money matters. I am sure they are great troubles. Thank heaven, my husband and myself have always kept our heads pretty well above water, but we can feel for others who are not so fortunate. Do take a glass of wine and a slice of Miss Oxenham’s seed-cake, Mrs. Akehurst, it will do you good ; you look as white as that table-cloth. You should try and bear up, Ma’am. It is a great disappointment to you, of course, having to leave Cheveleigh, and live in such a dull place as they say you have gone to, down in Wales. I was very glad to hear of your coming up to town this spring for a change (have you brought that sweet young lady, Miss Lucy, with you ?) for, although I suppose you can’t be about so much among grand people as you used to be, and can’t afford such large parties, yet it is a very gay and pleasant thing being up in town at this season. I am sure, Mrs. Akehurst, if you would come and take a friendly tea with us some evening, Miss Oxenham would be most pleased to see

you, and would send her carriage for you, to save your hiring one: they charge so much for those glass coaches at the livery stables; I suppose you have one to-day; I did not see you as you drove up, for I was busy finishing a row of my work. I am quite sorry, Mrs. Akehurst, you should have had the trouble of coming here on purpose, although it was very kind of you to do so; if I had seen you when I called at your lodgings, I would have asked you to allow me to come again, instead of your returning my visit. However, Ma'am," continued Mrs. Johnson, rather bridling as she observed that Mrs. Akehurst, far from appreciating this well-intentioned speech, had an angry spot upon her cheek, which contrasted ominously with its general pallor, "I dare say I have been taking too great a liberty, for I have not been used to the society of fashionable ladies like yourself. But I hope, Ma'am, you will believe I meant kindly. I'm sure my husband and myself have often pitied you for having to live in such a different style from what you have been used to; and if you had ever wanted it, George has often said, there is nobody he would have more gladly helped with a ten pound or twenty pound note, than yourself, for the sake of the old name."

Mrs. Akehurst, never capable of separating the

real worth and kindness of a character like Mrs. Johnson's from the husk of unrefinement and inconsideration, the result of a want of tact and education, not of heart, which frequently enveloped it, and at the present time prepared to discover insult and malevolence even in the most ordinary circumstances of intercourse, hardly waited to hear the conclusion of this speech. Muttering a few words, scarcely of courteous farewell, she hurried down stairs, and flung herself into the carriage, before the servant could reach the hall-door in answer to Mrs. Johnson's bell, and leaving that worthy lady in a state of considerable wonderment, partly at the singular behaviour of her late visitor, and partly at the stylish appearance of the supposed glass coach, which she watched driving away from the door until it finally disappeared round the corner of the next street.

Meanwhile, Butler, although for purposes of his own, and still under the allegation of a pressure of business, he had hitherto abstained from actual contact with his client, had, unknown to her, been himself in town for nearly the whole period of her residence there, and had contrived to procure tolerably accurate information, through various channels, as to her proceedings throughout that period, warily and stealthily dogging her steps, as it were,

in every direction. He now judged the opportunity suitable for developing a further and more important stage in his plans. The exact day and hour when he was to commence his further advances, the "second parallel," as it were, of the beleaguered fortress, he was, of course, obliged to trust more or less to chance; but fortune befriended him in this instance as it had done in one or two which preceded it. Mrs. Akehurst returning home late from the round of calls we have described, jaded, chafing, and disappointed, reclined for an hour or two on the sofa. Dinner was then announced, and she sate down to a repast which certainly appeared very little to merit the compassion of the banker's dame. But Mrs. Akehurst felt as if she were eating chopped straw; rage, mortification, jealousy, resentment at Mrs. Johnson's patronising airs, as Mrs. Akehurst termed the well-intentioned but ill-judging offer of kindness which had literally proved the last ounce in her burden of self-inflicted miseries, coursed through her breast, aggravated and intensified by the two hours' solitary thought which had preceded her meal, and recalling the gloomy feelings and passions (dissipated for a time by change of scene and occupation) of her lonely chamber at Plas Newydd. Hastily swallowing a few morsels and drinking a glass or two more wine than usual,

Mrs. Akehurst sent away the almost untasted meal, and returned to the feverish round of unhallowed and vindictive, almost maddening reflection. She was not left to pursue it alone.

After about an hour of agitated thought, during which she could shape out no settled idea or purpose, the room door opened and Butler entered. His greeting was warm and cordial; Mrs. Akehurst welcomed him almost as an old friend. After apologising for his protracted and unavoidable absence, and expressing his hopes that his client had derived benefit from her residence in town, Butler was naturally led to notice (which he did with much tact and delicacy), the traces of uneasiness, and he feared even illness, in her looks. A cross-examination, conducted with extreme skill and acuteness on Butler's part, gradually led to a statement by Mrs. Akehurst of the whole history of her grievances, social and financial. The slights and injuries which had rankled in her mind for so many weeks were severally detailed, and dilated upon with a vindictiveness which showed how deeply they had wounded; to the concluding scene with Mrs. Johnson, especially, this long suppressed feeling gave a tone and colouring, which made that good lady's well-meaning condolences wear the aspect of studied insult and impertinence. Butler

listened with marked attention to the whole recital, coupled as on previous occasions with an air of respectful sympathy, which he assumed, as we have said, with ready tact, and which under existing circumstances inspired Mrs. Akehurst with a feeling of increased confidence, and a disposition to rely more and more upon the only person who in her present position seemed still disposed to aid and befriend her. To the financial difficulties of which his client complained, Butler promised his best attention on the following morning, when he would without fail, he said, see Mrs. Akehurst, and endeavour to arrange something for her security; although he feared it might be necessary for her to curtail the expenses even of her present establishment.

Butler then rose to take his leave. He paused, however, at the door, and returned partly into the room, adding, apparently as if the reflection had just crossed his mind, "Well, I ought not to say it perhaps, Mrs. Akehurst, and I am sure you will acquit me of any wish to trespass upon the confidential position in regard to these matters to which you have done me the honour of admitting me. Still one cannot shut one's eyes to facts, and it does really seem, I have more than once thought, a thousand pities that a property like Cheveleigh should be sacri-

ficed, as I fear it will be. If Master Charles had lived, it might have been a different thing; but I cannot but fear Mrs. Akehurst, that Miss Lucy" (Butler watched intently the effect produced by the name, and at once saw that he had nothing to fear on the score of any diminution of the old feeling), "amiable and accomplished as she is, will prove singularly ill-fitted for the management of the property. I saw enough of this before you left the house; she will squander the whole of it upon paupers and beggars. I do heartily wish, my dear Madam," continued Butler, falling now into that measured utterance which he had used on one or two previous occasions, and which seemed to leave his words, long after they had been spoken, hanging and wreathing themselves about the mind of the listener, like some unwholesome exhalation,—“I do heartily wish that somebody could have had the estates who would have known how to enjoy them properly. Supposing, for instance, that your husband's father had not made that foolish settlement, which I never can consider right in justice, whatever it may be in law, or that” (Butler slightly hemmed) “Miss Akehurst had died in infancy; what a desirable thing it would have been; just think what your position might be at the present moment, instead of undergo-

ing all these mortifying slights and difficulties. However, there is no help now, I fear. In two years about, I should imagine, Miss Akehurst will be of age, *if she lives*; and, as I believe I once told you, the first thing she will do will of course be, either at her own suggestion, or at any rate at that of the trustees, to bar the entail; and then even the remote interest you have at present is hopelessly destroyed. But I will say good night now, my dear Madam; I see you are much fatigued; you may expect me quite the first thing to-morrow morning." And with these words Butler quitted the room.

Mrs. Akehurst was not so tired but that on the attorney's departure from the room she went up to her own chamber, and there for one, two, four, nearly five hours, stood with her arm leaning on the mantel-piece, hardly changing her attitude or posture; seeking no support, apparently unconscious either of the lapse of time or of the bodily and mental fatigue which she had previously experienced. She seemed fascinated to one spot. One sentence of Butler's last speech, which he had taken care to utter in a tone more deliberate and measured than even the rest, rung in her ears incessantly, like the words that frame themselves to an excited or busy fancy in an oft-heard chime of bells, recurring again and

again until we lose the power to detach the mind from their monotonous refrain—"If she lives; if she lives."

Yes; so it was; Lucy's life was that which stood between her and Cheveleigh. All the daily and hourly mortifications she had experienced; the change of position; the alienation of friends; the pressure of money difficulties; here was the cause of all! Between her and Cheveleigh; between her and all that she cared for or coveted in existence, rose this one life; this being, apparently designed only to rob her of that which she might rightfully have claimed; to inflict on her torture, injury, ruin. Here, too, was the source of that long cherished, inexplicable antipathy! It had motive enough now. The motive, indeed, was in her mind before; since the time when Butler had explained his phrase "contingent interest," it had fled through her brain, had rested there, had germinated in aversion and dislike; but it had never come forth as an avowed fact, openly and undisguisedly. Now, it did so. And with it came, for the first time, *another* thought, a wild and thrilling, though momentary sense of *deliverance*. "If she lives." The decree then was not finally sealed, not yet; it *might*, by

possibility, be reversed; the obstacle removed; herself reinstated. It was a terrible moment.

Reader, if ever the thought should cross thy mind that another's death would be thy gain, be it in the most fleeting and shadowy form of fancy or speculation, cast it from thee, instantly and utterly, as a noxious reptile—in it lurks the germ of *murder*. Once allowed to rest upon the heart and brain, once cherished and admitted as habitual, and, as far as thine own agency goes, thy future innocence is then but the creature and toy of circumstances. Thou mayest, from want of opportunity, or by God's special mercy, be preserved, many are, from the actual execution and act of violence, nay even from the guilt of purpose or desire. But thou *mayest* be led on, the thought ripening into the wish, the wish into the overt act, until that first struggling embryo of evil shall terminate in the assassin's knife or the deadly drug of the accursed poisoner. Therefore, reader, as we have written, cast it from thee instantly and utterly; like Satan, at the touch of the seraph's spear, thou shalt see it rise up before thy face in its true form and feature, the incarnation of a reprobate soul.

Alas! in such moments it is often some trivial, unnoticed circumstance on which man's safety really

turns ; just as in the hurricane or the siege, the skill and intrepidity of the seaman, the dauntless valour of the eager assailants, prevail or become ineffectual from some such trifle as the welding of an iron bolt, or the length of a scaling ladder. Then, too, small daily *habits*, things which we have done day after day without questioning or hesitation until they have become almost instincts, are at such times as that of which we now write of unspeakable importance : in the grand turning point of life they make or mar its whole future. It was the moment of Mrs. Akehurst's doom ; the selfish, heartless character of past years was to ripen into guilt of a darker dye than commonly falls to the lot of human error, or, slowly and painfully, to retrace its steps along the path of discipline and virtue ; it was a moral crisis, at which angels shudder and avert their gaze. Nor was a ray of light wanting for the guidance even of that darkened soul. As the night wore on, and the mother still maintained her solitary vigil, gazing at the evil spectre which now came boldly forth and confronted her, not dismissing, and yet not encouraging it ; as the knowledge of the evil she had cherished unavowed, to some extent unconsciously, all these past months, but which if she *now* admitted into its old place, must come there in

its *true* guise and dimensions, uncloaked, undissembled; as the conviction of the past, the alternative of the future, thus rose for one moment, definitely and forcibly before her, it was not without one merciful beam, streaming forth at the same instant from the portals of the undefiled city, and showing in its breadth and nakedness the judgment, even in men's eyes, of that unrepented past, of that possible and most fearful future.

But not for long may such blessed influences continue; rejected or unaccepted, they fade away, like the light of declining suns, and leave the soul in its darkness and desolation. Mrs. Akehurst shuddered as she now, for the first time in that dreary life, read and knew her own self; but she maintained her posture; she bent no gaze upwards, she did not kneel in remorse and penitence; she had no voice or thought of *prayer*. Even to the hurried formal petition, which too often ushers in man's sleep, the type of death, some measure of grace might have been accorded; some continuance of the now fast receding light and knowledge of better things. But Mrs. Akehurst had never had even this habit; for years past she had bent no knee, night or morning, to the Creator and Preserver of souls. But she was tired, and must now, at length, seek repose;

and raising her arm from the hard marble, she turned to her dressing-table and prepared to retire for the night. One gleam of light, one last emanation from above, still faintly lingered on the horizon of that dark soul; she approached the table. Upon it lay the empty jewel-case, stripped of its glittering ornaments, and reminding her of the brilliancy and splendour of the scenes to which she must now henceforward be a stranger. With a loud cry, partly of anguish and partly of rage, she dashed the empty casket to the ground; and the light went out hopelessly in obscure darkness.

CHAP. XIV.

—“How within shall wasteful envy
Round that lonely bosom coil,
Now in impotent emotion
Swelling as the pulses boil ;—”
HOR. *Od.* i. 25, 13.

ON the following morning, Butler was as early in his attendance at Brook Street as he had promised to be, and found Mrs. Akehurst, notwithstanding the late hour at which she had retired to rest, up and prepared to receive him. Without recurring to the suggestion which had so agitated her, he proceeded to investigate the posture of affairs in a pecuniary point of view. Although Mrs. Akehurst shrank from admitting, even to her confidential adviser, the amount of the obligations to tradesmen which she had incurred, Butler saw enough to show that these were considerable, and also ascertained, what he was most desirous of knowing, the names and addresses of her principal creditors. Butler gently remonstrated with his client on the extent to which she had

thus involved herself, and by holding out the prospect of a present supply from the Jew Doctor, extorted from her, without much difficulty, the promise of greater prudence for the future ; for Butler, although willing enough that his client should be entangled in a certain amount of pecuniary embarrassments, had no wish that they should be carried to a pitch which might derange his future plans. He also stipulated that the carriage should be put down, and the footman discharged as soon as possible, to which Mrs. Akehurst, in whose memory the mortifications of her yesterday's round of calls were still fresh, also assented with little opposition ; indeed, she felt relieved that Butler had not suggested her return to Plas Newydd ; but this, as the reader will guess, formed no part of the worthy attorney's present schemes. After a rather protracted conference, Butler took his leave, promising, if he were successful with the Jew, to return on the day following.

And now ensued, in this eventful crisis of Mrs. Akehurst's life, a dark, dreary period, extending over some three or four weeks ; the reproduction, although in an intensified form, and under altered circumstances, of her Welsh seclusion. The latter, indeed, could hardly have been more retired than

her present abode, situate as it was close to the great mart and thoroughfare of fashion. Not a soul in all the gay multitude, whose carriages whirled within such easy distance, and many of whom had, in other times, crowded her glittering saloons, ever came to see her ; a spell of solitude seemed to have fallen on the house and its inmates ; visitors, friends, acquaintances, all kept aloof. One person, indeed, came there constantly, assiduously, unremittingly, and that was Butler. Now that he had again commenced what we may term active operations, Butler pushed them with vigour and activity. The dark suggestions of his visit described in the last chapter, without ever specifically referring to them, he contrived, by a thousand remote channels of allusion, to keep unceasingly before his client's mind ; and the workings of that mind he watched closely and narrowly. Slowly but surely they developed the fatal germ which had been implanted there,—the presence of evil, which now haunted that dark chamber, not in the obscure imagery and fleeting shadows of its former occupation, but in its own avowed undissembled nakedness. Seeing no one, never changing for the stir and bustle of the external world the monotonous seclusion of her own chamber, the unhappy mother brooded incessantly over that one idea, the fatal

secret, as it were, of her disordered brain, which now, from continued association, began to write itself in characters, invisible to any other eye, on the very walls and furniture, on dull and senseless objects (the witnesses, like the stone pillar of the patriarch, of her unholy compact with the powers of evil), burning and branding its visible effigy in every nook and corner of her home; that one thought, almost sickening in its interest and absorption, "*If she lives, if she lives.*" Two years more, and then—*if she lives.*" How much might happen in two years; so many months, so many weeks, so many days; and each bringing forth something alien and unlike its predecessor! Think of the myriad contingencies of human life; and any one of these might terminate the hypothesis in a moment.

Like an abstract algebraic problem, frequently as one with which she had no immediate concern, but which offered a curious matter for speculation, Mrs. Akehurst held the proposition before her, inverted it, readjusted it, contemplated it in every phase, and from ever-varying points of view: "*If she lives; if she lives.*" Who can pursue the analysis further, and determine the precise moment at which the thought became the wish; the retrospect of what might have been, became the maddening desire of what might

be? But the moment did arrive, surely, avowedly, unmistakeably.

And now rapidly ensued a further change, when the heart, brooding moodily over its cherished thought, that unhallowed treasure which nothing should now tear from its hold, developed what some moralists have spoken of under the name of the *secondary passion*. Singular, indeed, are the phenomena in the growth and working of this mysterious agent; bearing something of the same relation to the ordinary cycle of desires and hopes implanted in man's heart by nature which the wild and thrilling harmonic tones of the musical chord, elicited by a disturbing pressure in one part, bear to its more customary modulations. Thus, while bloodshed, rapine, sensuality, and other familiar crimes and vices are found, when analysed, to present only the usual phenomena of necessary and even valuable qualities of our nature, but pushed to a fatal excess; while we can thus trace the motive and germ of these in our common being; far different (to take an example), a difference not in degree, but in kind, is the craving appetite of the miser for his gold. It satisfies no desire, it supplies no want; the offshoot of an undue self-love, it terminates in itself and with itself, claiming no affinity with the stem in which it is grafted, and from which it with-

draws, by degrees, the nourishment and vitality. Occasionally, indeed, it happens that the new passion thus developed by an undue application of the mind to one object, is not in itself a stranger to man's nature, but warped and become morbid in its direction and tendencies; and this would better represent what occurred in Mrs. Akehurst's case. From the long feverish contemplation of one guilty idea, at first floating indistinctly through the brain, then embodied as an actual thought of absorbing interest, then cherished as a desire and influencing the whole heart and will, emerged with fearful strength the after-growth of a feeling, not foreign in its origin, but depraved and monomaniacal in its present tendencies;—that of *resentment*. Strange as the phase is in human character, it is not unusual. It is an old saying, we hate those we have injured; gradually we come to feel we are the injured party ourselves; we catch at every pretext for considering ourselves such. Thus did Mrs. Akehurst feel actually ill-used, as if a great wrong were being practised upon her. If the news of some fatal catastrophe at Plas Newydd had now reached her, she would have felt, not so much the strange wild glee of having the obstacle to what now, alas! was her self-avowed wish removed, as a grim satisfaction, a kind of acquiescence in stern

justice, at the punishment of one who had injured and defied her. Reader! the metempsychosis of the ancients was no unmeaning legend. When they represented man's spirit after death travelling through endless ages from the carcass of one unclean and raging beast to another, and finding rest in none, they did but typify the human soul, tenanted, in its downward declension, the ever-varying forms of guilt, and mingling its being successively with the lawless and unbridled passions, whose name is indeed "Legion."

Butler, meanwhile, as the time for the execution of his projects seemed to approach, gradually tightened his hold upon his client. Shortly after the interview described in the close of our last chapter, he had communicated to Mrs. Akehurst—it was a pure fiction—that the parties who held one of the mortgages upon her temporary interest in Cheveleigh were pressing for their money, and that, although he had seen no objection to advancing the sum on behalf of his own clients, other solicitors, less acquainted with the circumstances of the case, might probably scruple to do the same. In the course of the next week or two, by hints judiciously conveyed to some of Mrs. Akehurst's tradesmen, he contrived to have several heavy accounts sent in; one or two at

first, afterwards in greater numbers; some of them accompanied with demands for payment more or less pressing. Solomon Isaacs, too, at Butler's suggestion, declined to renew Mrs. Akehurst's bills, which fell due about the beginning of June; and as they still continued unpaid, threatened to sue out a writ for the amount; a circumstance which Butler took care to notify to his client, expressing considerable apprehension of the consequences. At length, the very time for action seemed to have arrived.

CHAP. XV.

— “O’erruling circumstance, the master-mind,
Steps with its ponderous mallet from behind,
Mocks our weak scruples, rates us to and fro,
And wedges in the key-stone with a blow.”

MACKENZIE.

ONE morning near the end of the second week in June,—Butler had studiously calculated the exact day,—Mrs. Akehurst’s pecuniary embarrassments appeared to have reached a crisis. Two weeks’ rent for the apartments was now again due, and had been promised to be paid on this particular morning; the trifling amount advanced by Butler’s Hebrew confederate, together with some further supplies from the jeweller, obtained by the deposit of nearly all Mrs. Akehurst’s available property of this kind, had been for some days exhausted, leaving absolutely nothing in hand to satisfy the landlady’s demand, and the daily items of petty current expenses; while Mrs. Akehurst’s maid, surmising how things were going, had also several times applied for her wages, which had become payable about a week

before, with an insolence and pertness which, to her mistress, accustomed hitherto only to the most obsequious submission from that class, appeared insupportable. Meanwhile, by adroit management on Butler's part, the dunning process had commenced in real earnest. Tradesmen's bills had gradually thickened, and had been accompanied with threats of legal process, a large batch having, as Butler had taken care to ascertain, been sent in in the course of the preceding day; while numerous single knocks, of the ominous sound so familiar to the indigent and embarrassed, had, during the same afternoon, startled Mrs. Akehurst from her abstraction, one or two of the more importunate visitors of this class having with difficulty been prevented, by her express commands, from forcing their way up stairs. To crown all, Dr. Isaacs had not only peremptorily refused any further advances, even of the smallest amount, in spite of various urgent applications to his generosity, of which Butler was supposed to be the vehicle, but had even, acting of course on the instructions of that worthy emissary, obtained judgment a few days previously in an action brought by him on one of the smaller bills drawn by Mrs. Akehurst, execution on which might now issue at any moment. Under this combination

of untoward circumstances, Butler presented himself on the morning in question in Mrs. Akehurst's sitting-room, having selected, by that union of adroitness and good fortune which characterises the successful general, the exact moment when his appearance was likely to be attended with the happiest results. He found Mrs. Akehurst alone, in a flushed, excited state, and sobbing violently. Her landlady, finding that the promised rent was not forthcoming, had given her notice to quit the apartments at the end of the current week, adding that, unless the accounts were settled on the following day, she would be compelled to adopt still more unpleasant proceedings. This had led to a violent altercation, in which the firm but quiet and courteous manner of her opponent had chafed Mrs. Akehurst almost beyond bearing, and provoked her to retorts which were met with a calm smile, and an expression of regret that any one in her position should resort to expressions so unsuitable for a lady either to utter or to listen to. Fresh from the irritation of this conference, Mrs. Akehurst, proceeding to unfold the morning's addition to the heap of bills which now nearly covered one of the card-tables by the side of the fireplace, found herself at the mercy of her pert abigail. The latter having,

by a steady application of her ear to the key-hole, admitted herself as a third party to the previous conversation, now burst in with a torrent of vulgar abuse, insisting on being paid instantly, and threatening every known proceeding of the law, civil and criminal, with a volubility which was only checked by her own want of breath, and by Mrs. Akehurst's distinct assurance that the money should be forthcoming in the course of the same day. This scene had *just terminated* when Mr. Butler made his appearance.

Since the conversation we have mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the subject of Mrs. Akehurst's affairs had not been referred to by either Butler or herself, excepting as regarded the trifling sum advanced by the Jew Doctor, and the subsequent unsuccessful applications supposed to have been made by Butler in the same quarter: Butler had also apprised her, in a general way, of the action brought by Doctor Isaacs on the bill of hers held by him, but had expressed his hopes that nothing serious need at present be apprehended in consequence. He now entered the room with a countenance expressive of some consternation, which, as he observed Mrs. Akehurst's disturbed manner, he allowed to subside into a character of

sympathy, and even kindness. To the recital which she now poured forth of her misfortunes, actual and impending, he listened as usual with an air of marked interest and attention. He did not sit down, but stood by the fireplace, slightly turned towards it, looking his client (who was resting on the sofa in front of him) full in the face, and appearing, by the thoughtful attitude he assumed as the narrative progressed,—his arm leaning on the mantelpiece, and one cheek resting firmly on his brawny hand,—to be intently considering the posture of affairs. When Mrs. Akehurst had concluded, Butler, without altering his position, slightly glanced at the pile of bills on the side-table, towards which his face was turned. "I suppose, Madam," said Butler, "those are the accounts you refer to? they seem very numerous, I fear."

Mrs. Akehurst assented, adding, "I was on the point of sending for you this morning, when that wicked woman came in and drove me nearly wild with her insolence; I am so very glad that you came in as you have done."

"I regret to say, my dear Madam," answered Butler, "that my presence here this morning was unavoidable. I am deeply concerned to be obliged to add to your distress, but I must not disguise from

you that I am under the greatest apprehensions as to what the Jew, Dr. Isaacs, may do in reference to that bill. I had hoped that he would have consented to wait until something more favourable might turn up for you; but from his manner last night, I am afraid he intends to enforce his demand at once."

"What could he do?" inquired Mrs. Akehurst, in some consternation.

"I am afraid," replied Butler, "that he has two courses open; he may either issue an execution upon your property,—probably what you have here would be more than sufficient to meet the amount due on the bill,—or he might, if he thought fit, arrest your person. But I should hope that nothing of this kind might be attempted."

Mrs. Akehurst's face exhibited a picture of blank dismay. Butler continued: "Besides, Madam, I am very sorry to have to tell you that I have this morning again heard from my clients on the subject of that mortgage; they insist on the amount due being at once paid off; and I fear there is no possible fund out of which you can raise such a sum. These heavy bills, too, are most disastrous; I had no idea that they had been so considerable. And of course, there must be money found to pay that girl's wages, and the rest, as well as for your current expenses. I must not

conceal from you, Mrs. Akehurst, that your position has become exceedingly critical ; whichever way we turn, it seems almost certain ruin."

Mrs. Akehurst almost wrung her hands. " Good heavens ! " she exclaimed, " can nothing be done ? have you nothing to suggest, Mr. Butler ?—how very, very dreadful all this is ! "

It was probably a minute or two before Butler replied. At the end of that time, he quitted his position for a moment, to ascertain that no one was listening at the door. Having satisfied himself on this point, he returned to the fireplace, and continued standing there ; not, indeed, resuming the attitude of close thought which he had previously maintained, but still gazing full at his companion's face. When he spoke again, it was in a slow measured accent ; his manner, although less desponding than it had previously been, still expressed a warm sympathy and interest.

" My dear Madam," said Butler, " I am decidedly of opinion that something may be done ; nay, more, I think that it ought to be. You cannot suppose, Mrs. Akehurst, that during the period for which I have had the honour to be employed by you in a capacity of some confidence, I have been an indifferent observer of the cruel change (if you will excuse

my using the term), the *cruel* change which has taken place in your position, and which, I fear, unless we can find some means of averting it, will now very quickly be consummated; the change from what we might almost call the height of affluence and splendour, to a situation—I must not disguise it—involving contempt and disgrace;—to ruin, beggary, perhaps hopeless imprisonment.”

A few muttered words from Mrs. Akehurst showed that she felt the case was not overstated. Butler continued :

“ You need not fear, my dear Madam, my now blaming you with any imprudence on your part which may have contributed to this result. I could not, indeed, have the heart to do so; brought up as you have been in a position so different, it was hardly to be expected that you should not, when circumstances altered, have found it very difficult at once to forego the refinements and indulgences of life to which you had been accustomed; and I believe there is not a person in the world who would not have acted as you have done. In fact, yours is a very different case from the ordinary one of a fine property dissipated by lavish expenditure. In the present instance, there is the whole of the magnificent estate, of which you have been so strangely, nay, so unjustly deprived,

still remaining untouched. Instead of being really in the power of these grasping creditors, there are the means of satisfying their petty demands a hundred times over still within your reach, were it not for the obstacle which has so unexpectedly crossed your path ; forced, as you will be, to forfeit all that is worth living for, and retire into a state of degradation, neglect, almost infamy, wholly without any fault of your own, and from considerations of a purely legal, technical character. Indeed, my dear Mrs. Akehurst, I feel that it ought to be prevented ;—and if you choose,” Butler lowered his voice here, “it shall be.”

Mrs. Akehurst trembled violently. She was perfectly *real* now ; no sobs, no exclamations. A surmise of something inevitable, the intuition of a great crisis, interpenetrated her whole being ; she saw before her the tempter, she knew, as if by some recently created instinct, the temptation ; and she felt that she must and would comply. It seemed to her as if at this moment her own very self, not the self of life, sensation, intellect, but that which is more actually self,—the moral being such as we have made it, in its long progress towards weal or woe,—came out from within her, and confronted her visibly, standing side by side with the tempter,

prompting him when at fault, pointing, colouring, adding roundness and detail to his suggestions, deriding *her* remonstrances, if any such there were, as things for which the time had now long past. At her feet lay the remnants of that other part of self, the thin veil of hypocrisy, the charred and crumbling ashes of what once had been, or might have been, good and womanly within her,—compassion, love, mercifulness. And, in stern contrast, implacably before her rose and dilated still, that fallen angel, that into which she had transformed the soul of God's gift, threatening, commanding, hurrying on the present inextricably in the fatal grooves of the past; a self-created doom, the harbinger of an eternal necessity. No guardian power held its shield before her; no prayer rose to her lips; no penitence stirred the dim chaos within, and won her aid; cowering helpless and unprotected, she bowed her neck under the yoke of her own forging, and entered within the precincts of darkness, and the receptacles of lost souls.

Butler had paused a minute or two after his last sentence. He still retained his position by the fireplace, watching his listener keenly and closely; hardly a movement or breath of hers seemed to escape him. Mrs. Akehurst's position was now changed for

that which she had previously occupied ; she now sat at the round centre table of the apartment, deadly pale, and in perfect silence ; her eyes down-cast ; her left hand resting on the table, and playing nervously with an ivory paper-knife which lay beside her. Butler resumed :

“ I see what you were about to say, of course, my dear Madam. You mean that you see no way by which we could prevent the estate pursuing its legal destination. I fear you are right. I am well acquainted with Messrs. Neill and Hetherington by reputation, and they have the character of being accurate and careful practitioners, who, in a matter of this importance, especially, would be very unlikely to allow of any flaw taking place. I felt scarcely any doubt of it, even before my opinion was confirmed by that of the Attorney-General. But then, Mrs. Akehurst, the point I wish you well to consider is, whether something may not be done by a judicious *influence*. For instance, suppose that you were to communicate your position to Miss Akehurst, stating the debts to Isaac and the mortgagees, the amount of the tradesmen's bills due, and so on. I can quite believe, from what I have seen of that young lady, that she would be disposed to assist you to some extent. Of course it would be very unpleasant for you to make such a confession,

and what she might be disposed to do for you (which could not be in any case for two years), must be after all of a limited amount; for the Court of Chancery watches such transactions with considerable jealousy; but still, if we could stave off matters for the present, and meanwhile make some application to her —”

Butler was interrupted by a passionate exclamation from his listener, whose face and frame had for some minute or two past been quivering with suppressed emotion. “Never!” cried Mrs. Akehurst; “never! I would sooner see the girl dead at my feet first.”

“I have not the slightest doubt you would,” *mentally* responded Butler. Orally, he renewed in a tone of increased kindness and sympathy: “My dear Mrs. Akehurst, I will be very candid with you. It is impossible for me not to perceive that you entertain feelings of some resentment in a quarter which I will not refer to again, particularly as I observe how much it agitates you. Now if I were disposed to play the hypocrite, I might perhaps express my regret at this; very likely some of your fine moralists and parsons would do so; but it’s all cant; put them in the same position themselves, and you will find that they act exactly as you and I do. I do assure, you, Madam, that wounded as you have

been, and outraged in every possible way, I cannot, as an honest man, who is accustomed to speak his mind plainly about things, I cannot censure you for feeling as you do; on the contrary, I have often been surprised at the patient dignity you have shown under your trials. But I must not allow my feelings to carry me away too far from our subject, for the matter is really rather pressing. Now the case I put, as to the manner in which it might be possible for you to attempt some exercise of influence, is only one way among several; influence may be exerted in numerous forms; and, if properly directed, it is quite incredible how much may be done with it. Now just allow me, Madam, to refer for a moment to what I believe I mentioned in a former interview as to the entail on Cheveleigh. You may recollect, perhaps, that, as I then stated, the entail does not give the absolute property, but requires to be what we lawyers call *barred* for that purpose; and this cannot be done until the tenant in tail attains twenty-one; and, if it never is barred, and there is no issue, the ultimate limitation, as it is called,—you may remember, perhaps, the Attorney-General used that term,—takes effect; that is to say, the person who is named in the settlement after the entail (which in the present case is yourself) becomes

absolutely entitled in possession. Now, my dear Mrs. Akehurst, considering that we have still better than two years to work in, during which we are *quite safe*, as I have said, from the entail being barred, it does seem to me," (Butler spoke here *very* slow, with frequent pauses, as if he were casting about for the precise words to express his meaning,) "it does seem to me . . . very possible . . . that with discreet . . . and judicious . . . management . . . you might come to acquire . . . and exercise . . . an influence . . . a . . . kind of control . . . over the mind . . . and character . . . which would tend . . . very materially . . . to interfere with . . . the probability . . . of any bar of the entail being *ever* executed. And then . . . if ever anything were to happen . . . which, of course, it might do, from a hundred accidental causes, you would have Cheveleigh again for your own property. Really, my dear Madam," continued Butler, with more animation, "it would give me for one the most unfeigned pleasure if this could come about. Over and above the satisfaction of seeing you emerge from all this train of embarrassments, and re-appear in your own legitimate station, it would really delight me most cordially to see you paying off some of these fine ladies in their own coin. A person, too, like that Mrs. Johnson, a trumpery banker's wife,

to be giving herself such airs! Once let you be back at Cheveleigh, my dear Mrs. Akehurst, and you would find some of these grandees as obsequious to you as ever; and you would then have the opportunity of showing that you have not forgotten their treatment of you this season."

During the latter part of this speech, Butler had had his hand in his waistcoat pocket, fingering his watch, but apparently forgetting to take it out; he now did so. "Bless me, how time runs on! why, it's very nearly one o'clock, and I have an appointment at a quarter past. I fear I must leave you now, Mrs. Akehurst, but I will return in the course of an hour or two; meanwhile, you can think over what I have been saying. I have only one thing more to add; it is a matter of some delicacy, but, as I am pressed for time at present, and, indeed, your own affairs require that something should be done without a moment's delay, you must excuse me if I seem to approach it with any lack of ceremony. I am a free-spoken, blunt man, Madam, and if you do not feel disposed to accede to my proposal, I shall not be hurt by your telling me so with equal plainness. Now, as I have said, I think it probable that you would be able *yourself* to carry out some such plan as I have suggested; but, at any rate, I

am quite confident that *I* could ; and if you like to avail yourself of my services, I will. In fact, Mrs. Akehurst, it now rests with your own decision whether you will recover, without the slightest personal risk, the splendid position you have so long occupied, or will allow yourself to be involved in the utter ruin and beggary which, as I think you must see, is now frightfully imminent. From the latter it is in my power to save you ; I will do so, and will also, as I have said, assist you in regaining what I always look upon as your own right, provided you are willing to help yourself, and—accede to certain stipulations. As regards your present difficulties, what I propose is this. It would be wholly impossible, I am sure, to raise any further sum from the Jews ; my influence there is quite exhausted ; I don't think I could screw out a single sixpence. But now, I have not been working all these years at W—— for nothing. I have a little property of my own, and lying handy in the funds, too ; it is no very great matter, but it would be sufficient to pay off these bills, and the debt to Dr. Isaacs ; and would probably then leave a tolerable surplus for expenses during the next year or two : as to the mortgage, I have little doubt that I could make some satisfactory arrangement. Now, if I

saw you really disposed, as I have said, to help yourself; if, when I returned in the course of an hour or two, I were to find that you had been thinking over our conversation, and that you were prepared to put matters into my hands, perhaps even to disregard, if necessary, some old-fashioned prejudices and scruples,—mere conventionalities, which I find people of sense and judgment, like yourself, always rise superior to now-a-days,—why, then, my dear Madam, I would not mind risking this money. But then, I fear, I must stipulate for two conditions. The first is one which I hope, my dear Mrs. Akehurst, will not prove wholly unpalatable to you, although I could wish that I had not been compelled to name it so abruptly. It is, that when you return to Cheveleigh, it shall no longer be as Mrs. Akehurst; in fact, that you will consent to—marry me!”

Mrs. Akehurst looked up, and spoke, for the second time only during this lengthened interview: “Marry! you!”

“Indeed, my dear Madam, I wish that I could proffer you a handsomer and more accomplished husband, although you could hardly find one who would have your interest more at heart. But I am afraid that I *must* name this as one condition; indeed,

I must add another to it, which is, that the marriage shall take place immediately, probably to-morrow. You see, I have two or three reasons for this, which I will name to you without hesitation. In the first place, I am risking everything I have upon this scheme; a tolerable risk too, any one would say; and yet I have no fears about it; without exactly seeing my way to parts of the detail, I have still a presentiment that it will come right. But then, you see, I must be compensated for this risk, as well as for my trouble. I cannot pretend to reinstate you at Cheveleigh out of pure disinterestedness; you yourself would not believe me if I did. So that I must, I fear, insist on a stipulation, which I trust you will not find very distasteful, and which would leave you the mistress, and myself the master, each in our respective spheres of action, of the magnificent property which I hope will ere long be in our own hands. Then, again, our marriage will be as between both of us a guarantee of what we lawyers call '*bona fides*;' an assurance that when we have once embarked in this transaction it will be with the determination to work it out cordially and unhesitatingly together. And then, lastly, I see a great advantage, almost a necessity, in our being thus happily united towards the successful prosecution of

any plan we may determine on. So this, my dear Mrs. Akehurst, is one stipulation; the other is less difficult. It is, that you give me your distinct assurance, your promise, that — that —” Butler hesitated for a minute or two, and then lowered his voice, “even if there is anything going on which you cannot quite understand in all its parts, you will still act in this matter, when it is once placed in my hands, implicitly as I may find it necessary to direct. I *must* have this assurance, for it will be impossible to work out the plan without great caution, and one false step might ruin all. And now I will take my leave for the present. Believe me, indeed, dear Mrs. Akehurst, when I say that I sincerely wish you well, and am most pained to see you in your present position, when things might have been so different.” And Butler left the room.

CHAP. XVI.

"What fatal word hath fled beneath
The guarded portal of thy teeth?"

HOMER, *Il.* 4, 350.

THE appointment to which the attorney referred was, as the reader may probably have surmised, a pure fiction; but he had business of importance to occupy him nevertheless. Hiring a coach from the nearest stand, he drove rapidly to Doctors' Commons, where he bespoke an instrument of some moment in connection with his future plans, and thence proceeded at the same rapid pace to a house of some pretensions in the neighbourhood of Charter-house Square, in which his friend and confederate Dr. Solomon Isaacs carried on an indifferent medical practice, combined with the far more lucrative avocations of a bill-discounter on the most extensive and nefarious scale.

"You may put in that execution now, Doctor, as

soon as you can," said Butler, abridging the somewhat wordy salutations and inquiries for his health proffered by his associate. "You have the men all ready this afternoon, I believe."

"Surely, surely," replied the Doctor; "I will go and set them to work at once."

"The sooner the better," said Butler; "but I may as well tell you beforehand that the seizure won't come off."

"Why not? has she got scent? is the monish safe? You guaranteed me that, you know, Mr. Butler, with the interesht; and the monish on the other bills, which are very heavy. I cannot lose my monish."

"All right, Doctor," answered Butler; "you never knew me fail yet in any little transaction we have had together, did you? When you've tried your hand by yourself, I suspect you've got into a bit of a mess now and then."

"Oh, I'm ruined, perfectly ruined, Mr. Butler; there is so much dishhoneshty now in the world; it's quite frightful how innoshent, plain-dealing people like me get taken in. But you're sure the monish is all safe?"

"Tut, tut! as safe as the Bank, Doctor," replied Butler. "But if it's any additional comfort to you, I'll tell you the reason why the execution won't come

off; it's because *I* shall be there, and shall pay the money."

"And the intereshts and coshts, mind," answered the Jew. "But, Mr. Butler, where's the good of our putting in the execution then; why can't you pay me here now?"

"That wouldn't do, Doctor," Butler answered. "Come, we've known each other some time, and I don't mind letting you into a bit of a secret. I'm thinking of being married."

"May he be blessed, and his spouse be fruitful, and her progeny like the sand upon the sea-shore; yea, like that of the four wives of our father Jacob, who was surnamed Israel!" ejaculated the Jew, with much solemnity.

"Thank'ee Doctor, I am obliged by your good wishes, but I have not the smallest desire for such a family as you mention," replied Butler; "besides, in the present case, such a result is out of the question. The fact is, Doctor, my intended is a lady not very young, and not very charming, and at present not very rich; in short, it is our friend Mrs. Akehurst."

His auditor made a gesture of surprise. "Yes," continued Butler, "the very same. You see she's been a little imprudent, and run herself up in a corner just at present; all the better for you. But there's

lots of money really, only locked up, out of some folly or the other ; but if I can only bring her up to the mark of holy matrimony, which I know I can, (for she is under immense obligations to me already, and my saving her from this execution will clench it), I'll soon rummage out the old hoards. I may have to cut my fine lady's wings a little, perhaps, that's all, for she's precious extravagant. But now, Doctor, I mustn't hinder your sending for those men any longer, for time presses, and so good-bye. Of course what I've told you is in confidence. You're an old friend, and I thought it right, as you know the party, to make a clean breast to you ; but it wouldn't do to have it talked of out of doors. And, by the way, the men you are going to put in must know nothing of my intention of paying the debt ; I shall come in there as an entire stranger." And with these cautions and admonitions, Butler departed.

He had dismissed the coach, and now returned in the direction of Brook Street at a much more leisurely pace than he had left it, sauntering slowly onwards, and filling up the time which must elapse before his intervention was required, by inspecting the contents of the various shop windows on his route, and other familiar resources of the unoccupied. At last he turned into Brook Street, and following

it on the side on which Mrs. Akehurst's apartments were situate, placed himself at the corner of a street near the spot, and awaited the result. One or two persons called at the lodgings, but they were evidently not those whom Butler was expecting. A considerable time elapsed; and he began to feel some anxiety lest the retainers of the law should have been out of the way, or some *contretemps* occurred in the execution of the Jew Doctor's commission. After some further suspense, however, to Butler's extreme delight, he saw that, while he had been looking in the opposite direction down the street, two persons had approached Mrs. Akehurst's lodgings, whom he readily divined to be those of whom he was in quest. One of the new comers was a short, middle-aged man with a bull-neck and freckled face; the other was young, and not ill-looking, with rather a pleasant expression of genteel comedy. They had knocked and rung, and were now ensconcing themselves in the doorway, in a position as much as possible out of the view of the dining-room. Some altercation seemed to ensue between these visitors and the young lady who answered the door, with reference to their admission; the difficulty, however, whatever it was, was overcome, apparently by the aid of some well-received gallantries on the part of the younger

and more handsome stranger, and, the door closing upon them, the new comers entered the house, where they continued some time. Butler allowed about a quarter of an hour to elapse, and then approached the door himself, and, on being admitted, rapidly made his way up stairs. Here he found a state of confusion existing which fully justified his calculations. On the drawing-room sofa was Mrs. Akehurst; she had just rallied from a fit of violent hysterics, and was now sitting upright, gazing with a distracted air round the room, and at intervals sobbing violently. In and out of the suite of apartments which composed the floor let to Mrs. Akehurst, passed the emissaries of the law; the short man, who appeared to be the principal, taking the lead, and leisurely scrutinising the contents of the various rooms, which still, notwithstanding Mrs. Akehurst's frequent consignments to the jeweller, exhibited various gewgaws and trinkets of an elegant and costly character. This functionary was followed from place to place by the landlady, now wholly scared out of her propriety of demeanour by an occurrence so unprecedented in her hitherto decorous apartments, and haunted by the constant apprehension that the beadles, as in the excitement of the moment she irreverently termed the sheriff's officers, would carry

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off some of her property by mistake. To crown the general confusion, the pert lady's maid, seeing before her a state of things which justified her worst fears as to the security of her still unpaid wages, was standing in the doorway, denouncing her employer in her choicest Billingsgate; the supply of which at the command of domestic blessings of this class, considering they are not taught it at school, and have few opportunities of acquiring it in the polished circles among which their vocation lies, may be looked upon as a remarkable and unexplained fact.

Ascertaining the exact position of affairs by a rapid glance round him, Butler pushed the indignant damsel on one side, causing thereby the same diversion of the outbreak of her wrath towards himself which is occasioned in a bull-fight by the appearance of a fresh assailant on the stage, and advancing into the room, exclaimed, with a well-counterfeited air of surprise, "Good Heavens! what is all this? Mrs. Akehurst, my dear Madam, what can be the meaning of this? Allow me one word, Madam." And Butler, walking hastily up to the sofa, placed one hand upon it, and leaning forward, so as to bring his mouth close to Mrs. Akehurst's ear, whispered hurriedly, "I see what has happened, it is *quite fatal*; it will be immediate arrest, if not

for this, at least for some of the other demands, unless we can stop it. Dear Mrs. Akehurst, there is not an instant to lose; in one word; you recollect;—you accept the conditions.” “Yes.” “You promise what I wished.” “Yes.”

Butler moved away, and turned round to the officers. “What can all this mean? what is all this violence about?”

“No violence, Master,” answered the short man; “we always like to be as pleasant as we can in these little affairs. Here’s our card:” and he held out the writ to Butler.

“Fifty-seven pounds odd; what, a paltry sum like that! Your employer must be under some great mistake, my man; this lady is in a position in society which makes any proceeding of this kind most extraordinary: I have the honour to be employed for her in the country, and know her circumstances perfectly. My dear Madam,” Butler continued, addressing Mrs. Akehurst, “you must really let me blame you for not having commanded my services earlier; I fear you must have been exposed to serious annoyances already,—that unfortunate nervous affection, which makes you so unfit to have any business forced upon you.—If you will allow me, Madam, I will settle with these

men at once. What is the amount due, do you say?" inquired Butler, turning to the officers.

"Come, none of that 'ere gammon, Master; you know it as well as I do. And there's three pound sixteen extra for the costs."

"Making altogether sixty-one pounds, all but a few shillings. I really fear I have not the amount about me, but I can immediately procure it?" said Butler: "stay; what am I thinking of though," he continued, as a significant smile passed between the two men; "I've all those notes from Futlow's, which I got on my way down here." And drawing a chair to the table, Butler cast up the exact amount, which he discharged; the officers, on the sum being paid, retiring rather sulkily downstairs. Butler then addressed the landlady, "And you, Madam, have *you* any demands? pray state them, and they shall be at once satisfied. If I might advise, Mrs. Akehurst, I would recommend your quitting this lodging at once, or at least, as early as you can make it convenient to-morrow morning; I should be most unwilling for you to remain where you run the risk of being subjected to such impertinence." Mrs. Akehurst having briefly assented, Butler settled the landlady's account, with the additional rent up to the time

for which notice had been given. At the same time, at Mrs. Akehurst's request, who found considerable relief after the excited and overstrained feelings of the morning in witnessing the surprised and discomfited look of her adherent, Butler discharged the lady's maid, paying her a month's wages in advance. He then, with a promise that he would see to their settlement, and a further gentle remonstrance to his client for having allowed her aversion to business to subject her to such annoyances, gathered together the pile of bills on the side-table, and adding, in rather a marked tone, "I will do myself the pleasure, Mrs. Akehurst, of calling here a little before ten o'clock to-morrow, and shall hold myself ready to be of any assistance you may require in leaving these apartments," proceeded down stairs, before the mistress of the house, who stood with her money in her hands, much astonished at the turn affairs had taken, and meditating some apology for the evident mistake she had made in regard to her lodger's circumstances, had quitted the room.

CHAP. XVII.

"The sacred rivers from the shore
Roll backward to the hills once more."

EURIP. *Med.* 410.

BUTLER's meditations, as he sipped his port wine in a private room at the London Coffee House, on the evening of the day referred to in the preceding chapter, were of an edifying, although somewhat discursive character. As he pursued them in a half-muttered tone, and they are of some importance to the future bearings of our story, we shall ask the reader's permission, although the present part of our narrative has already extended to rather an undue length, to furnish him with some detached *morceaux* of these soliloquies.

"Well," mused the worthy attorney, "we're over that stile at any rate, unless she plays me false to-morrow, which I do not think at all likely. No, no, there's a thorough '*animus*,' as they say in the Courts; she hates the girl like poison. - Bless me, though, how one has to cook things up for the palate

of some people. She knew what I meant fast enough; she'd have understood it if I'd only winked at her; and yet one had to go beating about the bush, just to furnish her with excuses: a sort of cranks for her to let herself down easy with. So, I'm to be a Benedict to-morrow; am I? Well, its worth it; twenty thousand pounds a-year; clear rents, paid nearly to the day, and with a little management, might easily be screwed up to half as much again! Why, I'd do anything short of this" (and Butler significantly caught up the skin at the back of his neck between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand) "for a worse chance than this will be; and positively, in the present case, there'll be no risk at all, if I can only work it. Influence; yes, that's the word; why it's law and gospel both. It would be another thing if we had to try our hand with the deeds; but that horse won't run. Neill and Hetherington have got the control of them; they'll keep them tight enough. No, no, we can't keep the estate from the little girl; that's quite plain; but then it doesn't at all follow that *she may not be kept from the estate*. You'd do it, Mrs. A. B. (that's A. for Akehurst that is, B. for Butler that is to be) precious fast, if you got the chance, I can see that; but it wouldn't do, I tell you, it *wouldn't do*; it's much too old-fashioned, even if you

try it on with chemicals; and besides, it's always certain to be found out. But then, people may be kept out of their property a hundred ways; they may die naturally, some do; or they may kill themselves; to be sure, that's not very common, when there's anything left worth living for; or they go to sea, and are never heard of more; or they go mad (that's a card to be thought of; mental influence that, you know); and then they're not heard much of either, except when they get fractious, and make a little bellowing of fine nights. Or again, one needn't push it so far as that; something quieter would very probably work better, and be less long lived, they say. Why, there was that Miss What's-her-name, down in Northamptonshire; a fine girl she was too, older than this one, and had a little money of her own. Bless me, she became as helpless as a baby, just from the way things went on at home. Old Hickling, that was her father's name; he'd been a purser in the navy, but he cut that, and took to preaching; he'd turned Baptist, or something of that sort. How long ago was that now?" continued Butler, pursuing the thread of his recollections, and casting up the time upon his fingers; "well, I should say it was twenty years, at least; I was down there upon Paxenham's business.

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There was only her and the old governor at home; a sprightly lass she used to be by all accounts; but *he* tamed her; he used to say 'that he liked to be a stern centurion in his own family.' By jingo, *he was*. The young one used to be sent out walking with a maid, keep nursery hours, and have milk and water instead of tea; then if she displeased him, she'd have to sit for hours together in a room upstairs, with the shutters shut; and such extempore preaching and praying and psalm-singing as went on all day long! Why, by the time I saw her (which was only a couple of years after he had taken this line), the girl had no more brains than a sheep; she used to keep close at her father's heels; go where he sent her; speak, and hold her tongue, just as he ordered; and tremble if he only crooked his little finger. He'd got her well in hand, he had; I don't believe she had two ideas of her own in the course of a twelvemonth. She was hearty and well-cared for too; to be sure, she went off the hooks a few months afterwards, but nobody thought much about it; some of the people said the old gentleman had been rather strict, but the chapel-goers, I was told, considered him a model governor. Can't we work something of that kind now? a little *mental discipline* (capital opportunity for it at that old dungeon in Wales); I

don't quite see the details, but I am confident that, with pressure, and the time we've got to work in, she would never dream of barring an entail, if we didn't let her ; not she ; she wouldn't say 'bo' to a goose if she wasn't allowed. All quite right in health too, if the trustees inquired ; only *intellect* unhappily deficient. Why if anything happened (and we could soon contrive that), they would all say it was a happy release. Or, stay, though ; she's uncommonly docile at present, it's true, but I'm not sure after all, that she hasn't too much spirit for that sort of thing ; you never know what some of these quiet girls have in them till you try. Wouldn't *depression* do better ; something that she might work on quietly by herself, if I could only give her the cue ; something for her to brood and muse over, and then to get into a low desponding state ? suicidal melancholy, I think the doctors call it. Well, well, we shall see ; it's no great difference the way how, provided we succeed, and that we shall do, as sure as my name's Butler. And now, good night old numskull" (and the speaker familiarly tapped the organ in question with his right knuckles) ; "you've had a longish day, and as you never yet failed me at a pinch, I won't work you any more at present. Well, it's rather a pity ; she's a nice little girl enough. But hang it all ; twenty

thousand pounds a year, and Cheveleigh!" And Butler retired to his repose.

Notwithstanding Butler's assurance to Mrs. Akehurst, he had taken care not to discharge the formidable pile of bills he had carried off with him, until the success of his matrimonial project was well ascertained. He need not, however, have been under any disquietude upon this head. On driving to the house in Brook Street next morning, he found Mrs. Akehurst, after a short delay, prepared to accompany him. She was attended to the door by the landlady, now profuse in her apologies and expressions of regret. The latter were waived, the good lady receiving instructions to forward Mrs. Akehurst's letters and heavy luggage to Butler's care at the London Coffee-house, and to refer all persons who might advance any claims against her late lodger to the same address; and Mrs. Akehurst then stepped into the carriage.

The day was close and gloomy, as the carriage drove through the crowded streets, but it *might* have been the glorious sunshine and fresh breezes of some heathery highland; the church at which it at length stopped, a mean edifice, with a brick pediment and white stuccoed pillars, was naked and empty, but it *might* have been the Dom Kirche of

Cologne, radiant with lights and thronging with its countless worshippers; the officiating clergyman was a slovenly reader, and his hurried slipshod manner contrasted almost ludicrously with the unctuous nasal drawl of the clerk, but their performance *might* have been the chant of matchless voices blending with the swell of the solemn organ; the sexton and the pew-opener, who were the only other attendants on the ceremony, *might* have been glittering angels from the gates of Paradise, for all that Mrs. Akehurst saw or heard, as she knelt before that altar, and repeated mechanically, with an unconscious but almost parrot-like imitation of the speaker's tones, those irrevocable words.—“For better and for worse; for richer and for poorer; in sickness and in health!”—she, the Medea, the assassin-mother, plighted her wedded troth to her guilty confederate, and worshipped with him, side by side, at the Eternal throne. Together they bent to the priestly benediction; together, when the simple but touching office reached its close, they passed from the solemn stillness within (type of the unearthly monitor in man's breast, which once hopelessly resisted ceaseth for ever its mute pleadings), into the whirl and din of busy life outside; together as they drove away, the door of the building, caught by a slight gust of

wind, jarred heavily behind them; prefiguring the barred gates of mercy, which shall close for ever on un pitying and remorseless souls.

Butler had decided on spending a week at the nearest continental watering place, and the newly married couple proceeded thither without impediment. Butler had arranged with his London agent, a respectable solicitor in Bedford Row, for the settlement of his wife's unpaid bills; any letters which might arrive he desired to be forwarded to the continent, the heavy luggage sent to the address he had given in London being allowed to wait their return.

It was with some interest, on reaching the watering place he had selected, that Butler found the post had outstripped them, and that a letter, bearing the stamp of the town nearest to which Plas Newydd lay, was already awaiting him on the table of the apartments which he had ordered to be reserved in the principal hotel there. The letter, which was in Mrs. Witherby's handwriting, was addressed to Mrs. Akehurst, or, as we must now call her, Mrs. Butler; her husband, however, opened it without scruple, and perused the contents with marked



